Computer active
ISSUE 700 | 3 – 14 JANUARY 2025
Learn something new in every issue

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Are you brave enough for number 7? p60

REMOVE OLD FACEBOOK POSTS
We're glad we did! page 74

DOWNLOAD BBC TV & YOUTUBE
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Top 20 programs as downloaded by YOU – all FREE! p50

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- ☑ Stay anonymous online
- ☑ Ditch File Explorer

PLUS

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SHARE YOUR LOCATION WITH FRIENDS & FAMILY
So they'll find you when you're out p62

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From the Editor

Every December Google reveals its top 'trending' search terms of the previous 12 months (see page 7). It's typically quite interesting, especially the People category which usually introduces me to names I'd never heard of (Sabrina Carpenter? Luke Littler? Richard Gadd?).

But I'm always keener to know which programs have proved most popular with readers during the year. We measure this by ranking how many clicks our shortened Snipca URLs get. What's clear is you still love programs that give you more control over Windows, whether that's revealing system info (Glow), replacing File Explorer (Files) or updating your software (Patch My PC). In a world of dazzling AI, these boring-but-useful tools remain as important as ever.

These are all high in the top 20 programs compiled by Robert Irvine in our Cover Feature. You'll also find programs for browsing the web anonymously, blocking YouTube ads and bypassing Microsoft's restrictions for upgrading to Windows 11. I have a feeling the last of these will become even more popular as October approaches.

Daniel Booth
editor@computeractive.co.uk

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THIS ISSUE IN NUMBERS

£125
Price of the RCA Roku smart TV, recommended by a reader – *p41*

9%
Drop in ultrafast broadband prices in 2024 – *p9*

2.7 million
Number of product manuals on ManualsLib – *p20*

HOW TO USE SNIPCA URLs

We use snipcas to turn long URLs that are hard to type into ones that are short and simple. They aren't websites themselves, which means they won't be recognised if you type them into Google. Instead, you need to type them into your browser address bar, then press Enter. Doing this will take you to the correct website.

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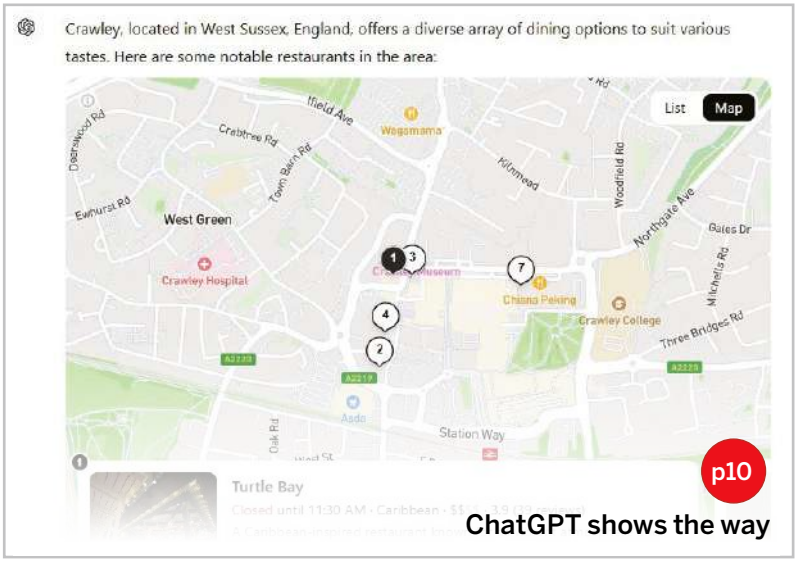
Crawley, located in West Sussex, England, offers a diverse array of dining options to suit various tastes. Here are some notable restaurants in the area:
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Crawley Hospital
Crawley College
Asda
Station Way
Turtle Bay

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ChatGPT shows the way

PCSpecialist Zircon Supreme R

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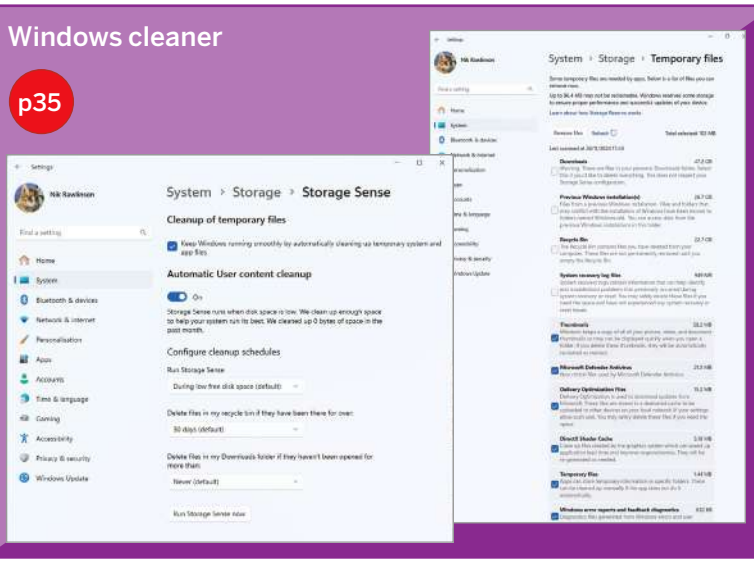

System › Storage › Storage Sense
Cleanup of temporary files
Automatic User content cleanup
Configure cleanup schedules
System › Storage › Temporary files

W11 'recommends' sites you're more likely to visit

Microsoft has updated Windows 11's Start menu to show websites you're more likely to be interested in, based on your browsing history.

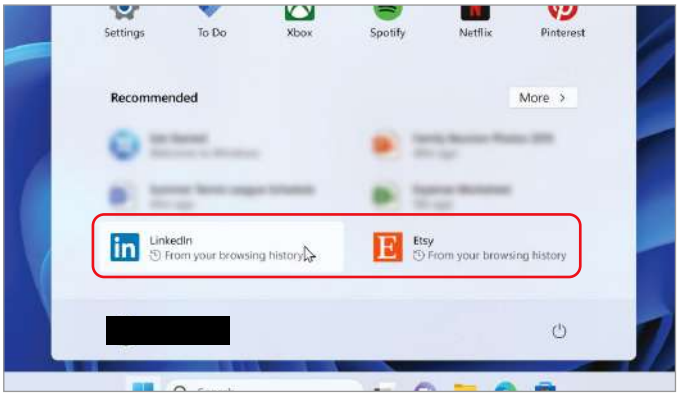
The sites appear in the 'Recommended' section of the Start menu (see screenshot right), which also shows recently used programs and files, as well as other items it thinks you might want to use based on your PC activity.

However, many users have said it's little more than a place for Microsoft to advertise its apps such as the browser Edge and OneDrive.

Users have also complained about Microsoft showing adverts from other companies in the section. They say it's misleading to place these in a section supposedly aimed at recommending tools.

The change is part of Windows 11 preview build 22635.4655, available now for Windows Insiders. Microsoft says it's based on feedback from users and will show the "highest quality sites" influenced by what you do online.

For it to work you'll need to synchronise your browsing activity with Microsoft's Edge browser. Sign into your Microsoft account, click the three horizontal dots at the top right of Edge, then select Settings. Now click Profiles on the left followed by Sync on the right, then make sure the History slider is on (blue).



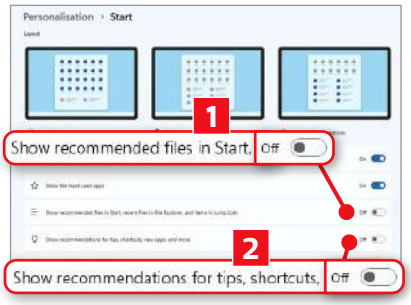
WHAT WE THINK

We've tested this and can confirm the websites Windows now recommends are more relevant. But that doesn't convince us these belong in the Start menu. If there must be a Recommended section, it should only be for tools and sites we use often, not those Windows *thinks* we need – and it certainly shouldn't contain adverts. But it hasn't been able to resist 'recommending' (ie, advertising) apps from third parties. How long until it does the same for websites?

Turn off Start menu recommendations

Windows 11 shows recommendations by default, but you can turn them off in Settings. Press Windows key+I then click Personalisation on the left, followed by Start on the right. Now click the slider next to 'Show recommended files in Start...' so it turns off (1 in screenshot right) – though this also stops Windows showing recent files in File Explorer and items in Jump Lists.

You also need to turn off 'Show recommendations for tips, shortcuts, new apps, and more' 2. Disabling these leaves the Recommended section of the Start menu blank.



FILE EXPLORER KEEPS TABS AFTER REBOOT

File Explorer in Windows 11 now remembers the tabs you had open when you reboot your computer.

Microsoft added this to the preview build 22635.4580, released in early December to Windows Insiders. Previously File Explorer would only remember your open windows.

To turn it on, open File Explorer then click the three horizontal dots (1 in screenshot) followed by Options. Click the View tab then scroll down and tick 'Restore previous folder windows at log-OFF' so it shows 'ON' 2. Click Apply, then OK.

You'll like this...
BBC Sounds is becoming an in-car app (www.snipca.com/53306)

but not this...
Microsoft's Recall still captures sensitive data like card numbers (www.snipca.com/53283)

Euros and tragic deaths topped UK's searches last year

Sporting events and untimely deaths dominated Google searches in the UK during 2024.

The company has unveiled its annual 'Year in Search' report, revealing the top trending search terms in the past 12 months. These are searches that had the biggest spike compared with the previous year – rather than the most searched overall.

Top of the list was Euros, as football fans sought information about the football tournament that took place in June and July in Germany. This was followed by singer Liam Payne, who died aged 31 in October.

The third most searched term was Jay Slater, the 19-year-old Brit who died after a fall while on holiday in Tenerife. Fourth was doctor and TV presenter Michael Mosley, who died after going missing during a walk on the Greek island of Symi.

Also in the top 10 were Kate Middleton, Oasis tickets and the US election (see box left). The Princess of Wales topped the People category, ahead of Donald Trump and 17-year-old darts sensation Luke Littler.

Globally, the most searched term was Copa America, the South American equivalent of the Euros, which also took place in June and July.

You can see all the UK results at www.snipca.com/53263. See global results and for individual countries by clicking the 'See what happened in' dropdown menu.

Click the 'Explore what was trending in' menu to see previous yearly results going back to 2001, where top searches included Napster, Nokia and Windows XP.

UK'S TOP TEN SEARCHES

1 Euros
2 Liam Payne
3 Jay Slater
4 Michael Mosley
5 US Election
6 Kate Middleton
7 Baby Reindeer
8 Olympics
9 Oasis tickets
10 Fool Me Once

Firefox to axe 'Do Not Track' because it's widely ignored

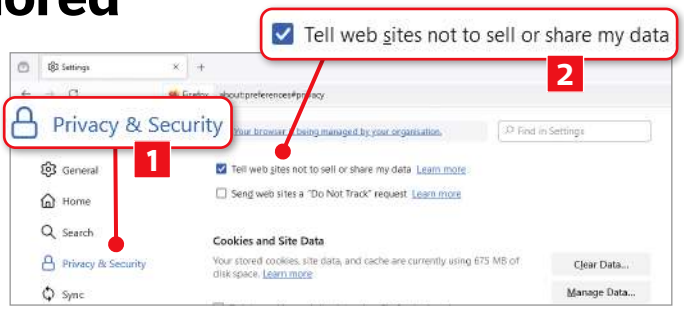
Mozilla will soon remove its Do Not Track feature in Firefox because it says it's no longer effective at protecting your privacy.

It added the option in 2009 as a way to ask websites to not track your activity online. But it was only ever voluntary, and many popular sites simply ignored the request.

Mozilla will axe the tool in version 135 of the browser, due for release on 4 February.

As a replacement it now recommends turning on the Global Privacy Control (GPC) setting, which tells a website that you don't want it to sell or share your personal data.

Sites take this more seriously than Do Not Track because it's legally binding in some US states, including California, and complies with the GDPR privacy regulations that apply in the EU and UK.



To turn it on in Firefox on your computer, open the Firefox menu (three horizontal lines, top right), then click Settings. Now click 'Privacy & Security' on the left (1 in our screenshot), then scroll down to Web Site Privacy Preferences and tick 'Tell web sites not to sell or share my data' 2.

To turn it on in Firefox on your Android phone or tablet, tap the top-right menu button, then Settings.

Now tap Enhanced Tracking Protection under 'Privacy and Security' then tap the slider next to 'Tell websites not to share & sell data'.

IN BRIEF

ADOBE ERASES PHOTO REFLECTIONS WITH AI

A new tool in Adobe Photoshop uses AI to remove reflections in photos (as pictured below). Adobe says it's been "trained using millions of simulated photographs". At the moment it works only on RAW photos – read Adobe's blog for more: www.snipca.com/53231.

LG STOPS MAKING BLU-RAY PLAYERS

LG has stopped making Blu-ray players and has removed them from its website. The South Korean company last released players in 2018 (the UBK80 and UBK90 models), though they've not been available in the UK for some time. It leaves Panasonic and Sony as the only major companies making Blu-ray players, though LG did say they might make them again if demand picks up.

TOMORROW'S WORLD

We're not going to tell you what this stylish grey slab unfolds into, which is just as well because at $275,000 (about £217,000) it's unlikely many will be able to afford it. C Seed, the Austrian company that makes it, says the super-rich often buy five at a time to use on their luxury yachts. Have a guess, then watch to see if you're right: www.snipca.com/53256.

IN BRIEF

NEW RASPBERRY PI 500 IS A PC IN A KEYBOARD

Raspberry Pi has released the 500 (pictured), a complete PC built into a keyboard, priced $90 (around £70). It has a quad-core ARM processor, 8GB of RAM, two micro-HDMI ports and three USB ports. It comes with a mouse, a USB-C power supply and an HDMI cable. Read more at www.snipca.com/53230.

UPDATE MANHATTAN TV BOXES FOR BETTER SD

Manhattan has improved how standard definition (SD) channels look on its T4-R recorder and T4 Freeview box in update 1.08, released in early December. It says viewers should notice "enhanced sharpness and detail" and also confirmed that YouTube will be coming to T4-R boxes soon. Devices update automatically overnight while in Standy, or you can press Home, then select Settings, System, Software Updates, 'Check for update now'.

THE WORLD'S GONE MAD!

Is it a bird? Is it a plane? No, it's a complete berk seeking 15 seconds of fame online by taking part in the 'Superman challenge' on TikTok. They're thrown in the air by friends, then strike an 'I'm flying' pose. Nice idea, except dozens of kids have been injured worldwide.

Govt to make Amazon and eBay pay for electronic waste

Amazon and eBay will have to pay for the recycling of electrical waste in the UK under new Government proposals.

Currently, firms such as Currys, Argos, Apple Retail UK, Tesco and Microsoft contribute to an Environment Agency fund for electrical waste collection and recycling.

But foreign companies selling to UK customers on online marketplaces such as Amazon and eBay have avoided this expense.

From January 2026 these marketplaces will have to report sales made by foreign sellers to the Environment Agency. Officials will use this data to calculate how much money the company must pay towards the costs of waste collection and treatment.

The UK generates around 1.6 million tonnes of electrical waste per year, which is about 24kg per person.

Circular economy minister Mary Creagh said the laws, set to be introduced in January 2026, would help UK high-street shops that are struggling to match the low prices of online retailers.

When asked whether these costs might deter companies from selling to UK consumers, she said: "I think it's really important that these measures put overseas businesses on a level playing field with UK businesses."

Amazon said it's "committed to minimising waste and helping our customers to reuse, repair, and recycle their products".

It encourages customers to send smartphones, tablets, laptops, gaming consoles and ebook readers that can be reused to its Trade-In site (www.snipca.com/53233), in exchange for Amazon gift cards.

It also has a recycling service for goods that no longer work (www.snipca.com/53234), as well as the Second Chance site (www.snipca.com/53232), which sells "pre-owned" and refurbished products.

• Read more on Gov.UK: www.snipca.com/53250.

Ofcom cracking down on illegal content

Websites operating in the UK will soon have to assess whether their services put users at risk of seeing illegal material, such as child abuse, suicide, fraud and terrorism, or face fines.

The warning comes from Ofcom in a new code of practice to help sites comply with the Online Safety Act, which became law in October 2023.

Under the rules – outlined at www.snipca.com/53249 – sites will need to state how illegal content might appear on their services and explain how they'll stop it.

Ofcom has given companies until 16 March to comply. If they miss this deadline, they could be fined up to £18m or 10 per cent of their global turnover, whichever is greater.

Dame Melanie Dawes, head of Ofcom, told BBC News this was the tech industry's "last chance" to make changes. She told sites that if they don't act, "demands for things like bans for children on social media are going to get more and more vigorous".

Ofcom says its codes give clearer instructions to sites on taking down images of abuse. It also forces social-media sites to stop suggesting people connect with children's accounts, and to warn children about the risks of sharing personal information.

In addition, Ofcom is forcing smaller file-hosting and storage sites to use hash-matching to detect material showing child abuse.

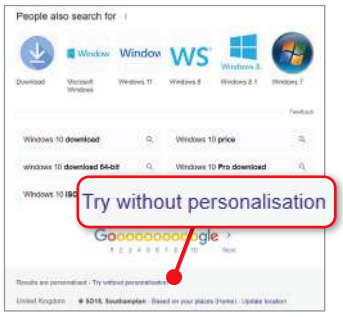
Many of the biggest sites, including Facebook and Google, already use this to identify illegal content.

Google adds option for search results that aren't personalised

Google is adding the option to search the internet without any personalised results, meaning they won't be influenced by your previous searches.

By default, Google personalises search results, using a range of information, including your location, past searches, browsing activity and whether you've clicked an advert.

Google does this even if you're not signed into a Google account. Data collected about you, including your search history, helps Google tailor results to your interests.



But a new option at the bottom of Google's search page (see screenshot above) removes all personalisation, such as your web activity on Google services.

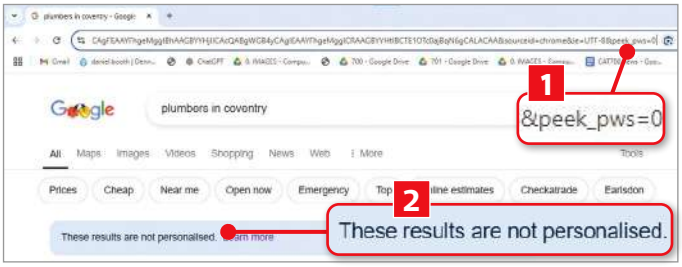
This means it will ignore what you've watched in YouTube, and what you've searched for in Gmail and Google Maps.

Additionally, it won't show results tailored to your interests, such as personalised ads or product recommendations.

You'll still see some results determined by your location, though they'll be based on your town, city or region – as derived from your IP address – rather than your street.

The option appears at the bottom of some search results on both computers and phones/tablets.

You can also show non-personalised results by searching on Google then adding &peek_pws=0 to the end of the URL in the address bar (1 in our screenshot left). Press Enter and you'll see the message 'These results are not personalised' at the top 2.



Prices for ultrafast broadband see biggest drop in 2024

Monthly prices for 'ultrafast' broadband packages (over 300Mbps) saw the biggest price falls in 2024, with monthly fees dropping by an average of nine per cent, Ofcom has said. Prices for 'superfast' speeds (30-299Mbps) fell by seven per cent.

The figures come in the regulator's annual report on pricing trends for broadband, mobile phone, landline and pay-TV services.

It found that prices for fixed broadband and landline bundles have "generally fallen".

However, the average amount customers pay has increased by eight per cent as a result of people switching to faster – and more expensive – deals.

The proportion of households signed up to full-fibre broadband services rose from 28 to 35 per cent (7.5 million) between May 2023 and July 2024.

Mobile prices also fell – by an average of five per cent. Since 2019, they've gone down by 23 per cent, despite the amount of data being used trebling during this time.

Over 500,000 customers are now signed up to a social tariff deal, Ofcom said, an increase of 125,000 from 2023.

The regulator also compared UK broadband prices with five other countries – France, Germany, Italy, Spain and the US – and found it came joint-cheapest with Italy.

The UK has the second-cheapest mobile prices, higher only than France. Read more at www.snipca.com/53220.

Did your broadband bills fall in 2024? Let us know: letters@comuteractive.co.uk

IN BRIEF

VOXI ADDS eSIMS FOR SIM-ONLY CUSTOMERS

Voxi, a mobile virtual network operator (MVNO) that uses Vodafone's network, now offers eSIMs for new and existing customers on SIM-only plans. These are digital SIMs that are built into phones, making it easier and faster to switch between networks than if your device has a physical SIM card. Voxi says you can get connected in under 10 minutes – see www.voxi.co.uk/esim.

TESCO MOBILE PRICES RISE IN 'POUNDS & PENCE'

Tesco Mobile has become the latest telecoms firm to scrap inflation-linked price rises. It will instead raise them in "pounds and pence" as a proportion of your current deal. It says this is fairer than the "one size fits all" increase imposed by rival firms, giving the example of a £14.99 monthly deal rising by 90p, and a £30 deal rising by £1.80. Prices will stay frozen for customers on Clubcard deals.

EE CHATBOT ANSWERS 60,000 QUERIES A WEEK

BT says its AI chatbot Aimee, available on the EE app, is now handling up to 60,000 questions a week from customers, more than double the number of two years ago. The company said this is freeing up human support teams to work on "more complex issues", and has a success rate "approaching 50%" for some queries. You can install the EE app from https://ee.co.uk/help. Read more at www.snipca.com/53210.

Will ChatGPT's search tool kill Google in 2025?

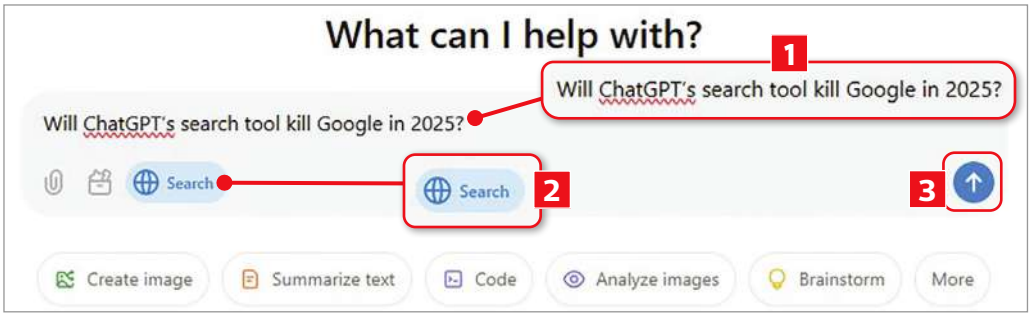
It's the biggest challenger in years – and might just win

This could be the year Google's empire begins to crumble. The company has already received a demand from the US Department of Justice to sell Chrome as part of proposals designed to break up the company's monopoly in online search, and faces similar scrutiny from regulators in the EU. But the real killer could be ChatGPT's search tool.

Since launching in late 2022, ChatGPT has quickly grown into the world's most popular AI tool. Millions of people ask it questions every day, attracted by its conversational style. We've been especially impressed by how quickly it responds to text requests such as writing letters of complaint, planning travel itineraries and recommending books and films.

These responses come both from its software, which has been fed vast amounts of data, and from information it finds online. It now goes further by letting you search the web directly during a chat. This arrived in November, though it was available only to Plus and Pro subscribers initially ($20/£16, $200/£160 respectively, www.snipca.com/53295). It was released to everyone else in December, and with it the potential to ruin Google's Christmas.

It's easy to use. If you haven't got an account yet, sign up at https://chat.openai.com. Now ask it a question (1 in our screenshot above), then click the Search button so it turns blue 2. Next click the arrow on the right 3 and you'll see a summary of results and links to the sites ChatGPT used to generate them.



It's early days for the tool, so the results often aren't as relevant or up to date as Google's. It struggles with real-time data, such as weather forecasts, news headlines, sports scores and stock market prices. Also, it searches a selection of sites rather than the entire web.

But results are improving rapidly, and it can already display maps with the locations of restaurants (see screenshot below), play videos, show images and give product reviews. And there's one thing it *doesn't* have: adverts. At least, not yet. OpenAI, the US firm that owns ChatGPT, will surely introduce them in time, but for now you get relevant results without having to scroll past 'sponsored' links.

It's early days for ChatGPT search, but it's already showing maps in its results

OpenAI doesn't mention Google on its page introducing ChatGPT search (www.snipca.com/53316), but we all know which search engine it means when it says ChatGPT gives you "fast, timely answers with links to relevant web sources, which you would have previously needed to go to a search engine for".

ChatGPT strikes a similar tone. When we asked it whether it will end up killing Google it said: "I don't plan to kill Google – or any other service, for that matter! Google is a valuable tool for many, and I aim to be helpful and collaborative, offering assistance without any destructive intent."

But when we pressed further it admitted that new technology always leads to "disruptive" change, including the demise of previously dominant companies. It even referred to how Google's rise crushed search engines like AltaVista, Excite and Lycos.

What must worry Google is that within weeks of launching ChatGPT has become a serious option for searching the web. Yes, Google is promoting its own 'AI overview' results at the top of searches, but these just add more clutter to the page – and you can't 'talk' with it to refine the results.

The momentum is with ChatGPT. In the past few weeks it has added options to ask questions through videos, WhatsApp, iOS and even your landline. More is bound to come. Look out for a Cover Feature soon explaining everything you can do.

THE FACTS

- OpenAI made ChatGPT search free for everyone on 16 December, having previously limited it to people paying for a Plus or Pro subscription
- It provides search results as part of a 'conversation' with you, rather than a page of links to click and, unlike Google, doesn't show ads
- However, it can't always show accurate real-time data, such as news headlines, share prices and weather updates

Protect your tech

Scams and threats to avoid, plus new security tools

WATCH OUT FOR...

Fake 'printer help' in Google results

What's the threat?

Scammers have paid Google for sponsored results for the searches 'HP printer help' and 'Canon printer help'. The scam was spotted by Malwarebytes, which posted a screenshot showing four fake results (1 in our screenshot) for the made-up companies Megadrive Solutions, Geeks Pro Software Prints, Select Easy 123 Print and Print Care Tech. All of these results are above the genuine URL for HP 2.

Clicking one of the fake results shows an advert then asks you to enter your printer's model number in order to download the driver you need to fix your problem. But this 'installation' fails every time you try it.

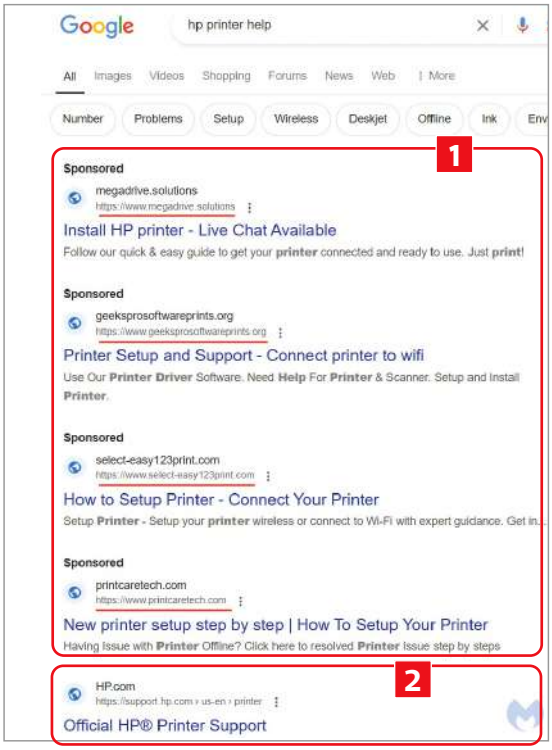
You're then told to click a button to start a live chat for advice on what to do next. If you do this, the scammers posing as experts will urge you to let them take over your computer to install software.

How can you stay safe?

Try to avoid searching for printer support on Google. Instead, make a note of the URLs below and bookmark them. If you do have to search Google for help, make sure you check that the URL looks correct.

Even better, ditch Google for the more private search engines provided by Brave (www.brave.com/search) and DuckDuckGo (https://duckduckgo.com). When we searched for 'HP printer help' both produced the correct URLs, with no adverts.

Brother www.snipca.com/53124
Canon www.snipca.com/53125
Epson www.snipca.com/53126
HP www.snipca.com/53127


Google
hp printer help
All Images Videos Shopping Forums News Web More
Number Problems Setup Wireless Deskjet Offline Ink
1
Sponsored
megadrive.solutions
Install HP printer - Live Chat Available
Follow our quick & easy guide to get your printer connected and ready to use. Just print!
Sponsored
geeksprosoftwareprints.org
Printer Setup and Support - Connect printer to wifi
Use Our Printer Driver Software. Need Help For Printer & Scanner. Setup and Install Printer.
Sponsored
select-easy123print.com
How to Setup Printer - Connect Your Printer
Setup Printer - Setup your printer wireless or connect to Wi-Fi with expert guidance.
Sponsored
printcaretech.com
New printer setup step by step | How To Setup Your Printer
Having Issue with Printer Offline? Click here to resolved Printer Issue step by steps
2
HP.com
Official HP® Printer Support

Credit: Malwarebytes

New tools | O2's Call Defence

Following O2's inspired attempt to bore scammers to death with 'rambling' granny Daisy (see Issue 698, page 9), it's now using AI to stop nuisance calls getting through in the first place. Named 'Call Defence', the new system analyses the number to assess whether it might be suspicious. If so, it'll show the message 'Suspected Scam' (pictured). You can then choose whether to answer.

O2 is rolling it out in stages, with Pay Monthly, SIM Only and Business customers getting it first. It'll be activated automatically on their phones, while Pay As You Go customers will receive a message when it's available to them. It works on Android devices and iPhones, though the latter needs to be running iOS 18.

Calls will be blocked only while you're on O2's network, not if you're roaming overseas or receiving calls on WhatsApp. Read more at www.snipca.com/53122.

ScamWatch
Readers warn readers

'TalkTalk' sign-in email

One frosty morning in early December I opened my inbox and saw an email from TalkTalk saying I had to sign in to keep using my email. It wasn't really from TalkTalk of course, but from scammers after my hard-saved money. It said: "We noticed you haven't verified your account and have not accepted our new web terms and services." Interestingly inconsistent writing style there – first using 'haven't' then 'have not'. It threatened me with 'Account disconnection' if I didn't click a link and sign in by tomorrow. No chance, scammers. I haven't (and have not) used TalkTalk for years!

Robert Marvin

Warn your fellow readers about scams at letters@computeractive.co.uk

Letters

Tell us what's on your mind

No, Bing, women didn't fight as Roundhead soldiers

I was intrigued by Gavin Hay's experiments using Bing's AI Image Creator (www.snipca.com/52985) to produce images (Letters, Issue 699). Bing failed to recreate Scottish soldiers from World War 1, so I thought I'd go back further into history by asking it for images of Roundhead soldiers from the English Civil War.

I take part in Civil War reenactments around England, so I have a keen eye for accurate detail. However, you hardly need to be an expert to spot the main problem with Bing's image (pictured above): women didn't serve as Roundhead soldiers. And even if they had, they wouldn't have worn feathers in their helmet. Such flamboyance was the style of Cavaliers, who the Roundheads were fighting.

I know AI is supposed to be learning all the time, but I think it would be better to have no images than misleading ones like this. This image serves no purpose at all.

Keith Baldwin

What's really going on with ChatGPT?

I remember reading in Issue 682 (page 60) about ditching Google for ChatGPT (www.chatgpt.com). I tried it and realised its potential, but found it of limited use. But just a few weeks ago I was struck by some startlingly human-like responses it was giving me when discussing certain matters. I suspected something was going on beyond what its programming, training and user-configuration could account for.

So, I set up a series of challenging test chats for the bot, where any suspected humanising influence would become more apparent. The results were astounding, so I converted two of the transcripts into web pages and sent them to ChatGPT's owner Open AI. I asked if they could confirm that its responses went beyond the degree of human likeness that could be accounted for by their programming.

I'm awaiting a response, but I read in Issue 698's Ed's Letter that you've got a ChatGPT feature coming up, so I thought I'd share the two transcripts I sent to Open AI. The first is about hitchhiking in 2007 when I got stuck all night at an A30 junction in Cornwall (www.snipca.com/53171). The second is an analysis of a poem of mine that would be incomprehensible to the vast majority of humans, let alone AI (www.snipca.com/53172).

Philip Goddard

CA SAYS Philip's transcripts show just how brilliantly ChatGPT can engage with a long conversation on almost any subject. He seems to be implying there's something more going on behind the ChatGPT, like a wizard lurking behind the curtain. When we put this to ChatGPT it said there's nothing behind the curtain except "a combination of vast data processing, algorithms and human engineering".

It added: "Unlike the Wizard, though, there's no single person pulling levers. It's a highly complex system that operates through patterns in language and data. It does give the illusion of personality and insight, much like a showman, but it's ultimately a tool built by many minds."

We think 2025 could be the year ChatGPT goes mainstream, just like Google did at the turn of the century. Look out for a Cover Feature on this groundbreaking tool soon.

Why I'm leaving Virgin Media O2...

In Issue 698's news story about Virgin Media O2's price rises (page 8), you ask whether readers will move to another service as a result. I've just turned 81 and have been with Virgin Media for 30 years. I've always managed to negotiate a better deal after my 18-month contracts have ended. However, my latest contract ends in January 2025 and I'm planning to switch to Sky. I don't have a TV package, so it's just broadband and phone.

Around 15 months ago my Virgin landline stopped working so I contacted

What's the Issue...?

When did you explain how to avoid paying Amazon's delivery fees?

Gordon Taylor

CA SAYS You'll find it in Issue 680, page 35 – buy a back issue from www.snipca.com/53131

CA SAYS In Issue 687, page 60. Buy a back issue from www.snipca.com/53128.

I've just installed Waze to help me navigate during car journeys. When was your How To giving instructions on this?

Tom Carter

I need to extract some files from an old hard drive but can't find the issue where you covered this. When was it?

Lee Ritchie

CA SAYS In Issue 692, page 35. Buy a back issue from www.snipca.com/53129.

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the robot on the end of the line. After several calls via the test socket I finally spoke to a real person who told me to connect my phone to the Wi-Fi hub and said they would post an adapter to me, so that's where I am. My question is why are we still paying to rent a landline when we're connected to the broadband hub?

I currently pay £40.25 a month to Virgin and never phone on my landline because it's too expensive. I pay £5 per month to Smarty (www.smarty.co.uk) for all my outgoing calls. My plan is to see if Virgin will match the £27 Sky charges for 150Mbps broadband and phone. I very much doubt it will.

Geoff Boow

...And why I'm sticking with them

My answer to that question is an emphatic no! Even with the price increases, my wife and I have been with O2 for many years and have no intention of moving to another provider. Originally, I was with Orange before being moved to EE. That was a bad move – I could only get an EE signal at the back door of my house, which was no good. At that point I moved to O2, and have never regretted it. Even with the price rise, we'll be staying with O2 as we get an excellent signal throughout our house. If you're happy with your present service, stay with it!

Allan Watt

My devices get EE mixed up with BT

Christine Moss's question in Issue 697's Problems Solved ('Has my smartphone forgotten my Wi-Fi password?', page 69) mentions that her mobile problem relates to her BT Smart Hub 2 router, and also that her mobile provider is EE. BT is currently trying to move BT broadband customers across to EE. I agreed to do this recently.

Installing my new EE router was easy, and it automatically connected all 11 devices in my home. The strange thing is that both my laptop and PC think they're still connected to my old BT Smart Hub 2. The network name they show is different to the name listed on the back of the EE router. All I got from the EE agent I spoke to was, 'Doesn't matter, EE/BT are the same'. There are obviously a few bugs in the BT/EE reorganisation.

Bob Ballard

STAR LETTER

Microsoft should release Windows 11 'Lite' for PCs without TPM 2.0

News
The top stories in the world of technology
Microsoft: no U-turn on strict Windows 11 requirements

You reported in Issue 699 (page 6, pictured) that Microsoft won't "U-turn" on its decision to require Windows 11 computers to have the TPM 2.0 chip. I wonder if such inflexibility might cause the public to perform its own U-turn and give up Windows entirely.

Microsoft might insist that TPM is a "non-negotiable" part of Windows, but it's not absolutely necessary for a functioning or safe computer. PC security exists on a spectrum. Anyone using Windows 7 online is mad. Anyone using Windows 7 *offline* is less so. Anyone using Windows 10 without TPM doesn't have much to worry about. Anyone using Windows 11 with TPM activated is as protected as you can be.

My point is that Microsoft needs to find a way to keep 600 million Windows 10 computers safe from next October. It's deluded if it thinks most of those users will pay for extended security updates. But they might be persuaded to upgrade to Windows 11 if Microsoft develops a clever workaround that lets them use the operating system even if their machine lacks a TPM chip.

Perhaps it can release a 'lite' version of Windows 11 that doesn't need TPM. This could have the basics that most people need (email, online storage, the software we all use currently), but none of the AI tools that are being foisted on us. The company would certainly do this if it thought it could make money out of it.

It should also think of its public image. It's not a good look if a carbon-neutral company is responsible for 600 million computers being chucked into landfill.

Peter Starkey

The **Star Letter** writer wins a **Computeractive** mug!

PayPal shares data to avoid charging

It was interesting to read Issue 698's article (page 62) regarding PayPal's shortfalls and the alternatives. While I agree with much of what you wrote, there perhaps needs to be an understanding of why companies, and banks in particular, share customer data.

Throughout Europe and much of the rest of the world many people pay an account fee even for personal accounts. Here in the UK, while businesses usually pay a fee, the public is very reluctant to pay account fees for personal banking, despite efforts to move us to this way of banking.

PayPal has no doubt allowed businesses to share customer data as a way of raising money to fund its services. While under GDPR rules it must allow you to 'opt out', it's not going to encourage this – which is why the option is set to 'on' by default. If everyone opted out, PayPal would make no money from businesses and would likely need to introduce charges. If it did that, many of us would leave, sending PayPal into a spiral of decline. So, while the article was factually true, perhaps it should have asked PayPal why it now lets businesses share data.

David Winterburn

Consumeractive

We stand up for your legal rights

Can I get a refund for rolling VPN subscription?

LEAD CASE

Q A payment for £45.60 was taken from my PayPal account by Spider VPN for a subscription I no longer use. I tried numerous times to cancel it before it renewed, but was unable to. Despite explaining the Consumer Contract Regulations (CCRs) to the company it has refused to give me a refund, claiming this is explained in its terms and conditions.

I thought my rights would be the same as Eirian Williams', who wanted a refund from DelM8 in Issue 696.

Paul Underhill

A Paul's right that his case is similar to Eirian Williams', and it might end up being resolved in the same way (see Case Update below). The CCRs give you 14 days to claim a refund for a subscription, as long as you haven't used it. Downloading the software that comes with the subscription would count as using it. This applies when a subscription is renewed, not just when it first begins.

Spider VPN claims that it doesn't have to refund Paul because it correctly processed his payment, but this is irrelevant. However, it's unlikely Paul will get a refund from the company because it was dissolved in June, as confirmed on Gov.UK (www.snipca.com/53196, pictured).

Paul should first ask PayPal for a refund, saying the payment was unauthorised. If it doesn't offer him one, he should then ask his bank for a chargeback, giving the same reason. His bank might push back and say it's PayPal's responsibility because it processed the payment. It's a grey area legally, which is why banks often challenge chargebacks in such cases. But one way or another Paul should get his money back.

CASE ONGOING

Why bother with Trading Standards?

Q You often suggest we should report rogue traders to Trading Standards, which I've done in the past. But apart from a sense of satisfaction, what good is this to me? I've never got my goods or money back.

Iain Sterling

A That's a fair question. The purpose of Trading Standards is to stop traders breaking the law, so they observe rules in areas such as health and safety, selling counterfeit goods and breaching consumer rights. It asks companies to change their behaviour so they no longer break the law, but this doesn't usually involve refunding customers.

If a company refuses to respond, Trading Standards can take legal action against it. At this point it might ask the court to compel the company to refund customers, though this usually happens only if the breach of law is criminal or particularly severe.

So, in short, you can get your money back after reporting a company to Trading Standards, but it can take some time. You can do this via Citizens Advice website: www.snipca.com/53194.

CASE CLOSED

CASE UPDATE

Bank issues chargeback for DelM8 subscription

We're pleased to report that Eirian Williams' bank has refunded him the £40 that address-finding app DelM8 (https://delm8.com, pictured) took from him as part of a rolling subscription (see Issue 696). Eiriam used DelM8 when he worked as a paramedic, and he says it's a great app. But he no longer needs it now he's retired, and didn't realise he had to cancel his subscription.

We told Delmate Ltd, which owns DelM8, that Eirian was entitled to a refund because he had cancelled his subscription within 14 days of it being renewed, and hadn't used it during this time. It agreed to cancel his subscription, but refused to refund him. The company told us it doesn't send reminders to customers that their subscription is being renewed, but it will have to soon when the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Act is enforced – hopefully in April.

We then told Eirian to ask for a chargeback through his bank, which it processed. DelM8 didn't get back to us, though it did unsuccessfully challenge the bank's decision. If a retailer *does* object to a chargeback and your bank won't accept any proof you have that the payment was unauthorised, you should take the matter to the Financial Ombudsman Service (www.financial-ombudsman.org.uk).

TalkTalk broke contract, so can I leave for free?

Q In late September, I entered into a verbal contract with TalkTalk, later confirmed by email, to continue my broadband and landline for 24 months at a price which was £1 a month lower than I had been paying. However, I'm still paying the higher rate, and TalkTalk's website now shows I'm out of contract. Can I now leave without paying a fee, or am I bound to the emailed contract?

John Derwent

A We can't see any reason why John should have to pay a fee to cancel early. TalkTalk failed to honour the agreement it made with John in September and so has broken its contract with him. To help his case John should take a screenshot of the web page showing he's out of contract. He should refer to this if TalkTalk claims he must pay a fee to leave.

However, if John wants to stay with TalkTalk he should point out that the email quoted a lower price than his current deal, and ask the company to honour this.

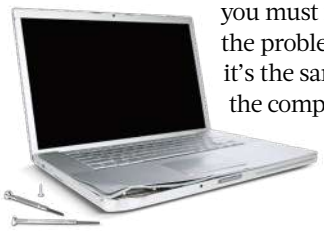
We'll ask TalkTalk what's happened and say that it has a chance of keeping John as a customer if it admits its error and acts quickly to fix it. Ideally, as an apology it would offer him a cheaper deal, and backdate it to September so he's not left out of pocket.

If not, then it must refund him the extra he has paid.

CASE ONGOING

Do I need to pay again after laptop repair failed?

Q I had a laptop repaired by a local company, but it's still not working properly. The shop wants to charge me again to fix it, but I thought services (as well as products) are covered in the Consumer Rights Act (CRA). If so, doesn't that mean I shouldn't need to pay again?



Ellie Hayes

A Yes, services are covered by the CRA and companies must meet minimum standards, including work being of satisfactory quality and carried out with reasonable skill and care. However, if a company falls short, you must first give it the chance to rectify the problem one more time. Providing it's the same problem and not a new one, the company can't make a further charge.

In Ellie's case if the company can fix the problem, but not within a reasonable timeframe (say, a couple of weeks), then Ellie can claim damages, which would be a partial refund. If it can't fix the laptop at all, then she's entitled to all her money back. This refund must be made within 14 days of the company agreeing that you're entitled to it.

If the trader refuses to work with you, then the next step would be taking the matter to the small claims court. But as of May 2024, many claims worth less than £10,000 first have to go through mediation (see www.snipca.com/53195). This is a good thing because the courts frown on any businesses that try to ignore this process.

CASE CLOSED

CREDIT WHERE IT'S DUE

Hawkes sent new binoculars after two days

One of the prisms in my three-year-old pair of Hawke binoculars had gone out of alignment, probably because they'd been dropped. This rendered them useless. There's a national shortage of optic repairers, so in desperation I contacted the makers, Hawke Optics (https://uk.hawkeoptics.com).

I was able to send them proof of purchase and on Tuesday morning received a prepaid postage label. I sent them off that afternoon and received confirmation of their receipt on Wednesday morning. On Thursday, I received a brand-new pair of binoculars. Now that's impressive service! In fact, it's difficult to think how it could have been better.

I hope you see fit to publish this as a counterbalance to the problems elsewhere on this page and to show that there are companies who care about their customers.

David Allen

Has a company impressed you with its customer service? Please let us know: editor@computeractive.co.uk

Contact
Hawke Optics

- **Email** uk@hawkeoptics.com
- **Phone** 0345 345 5555

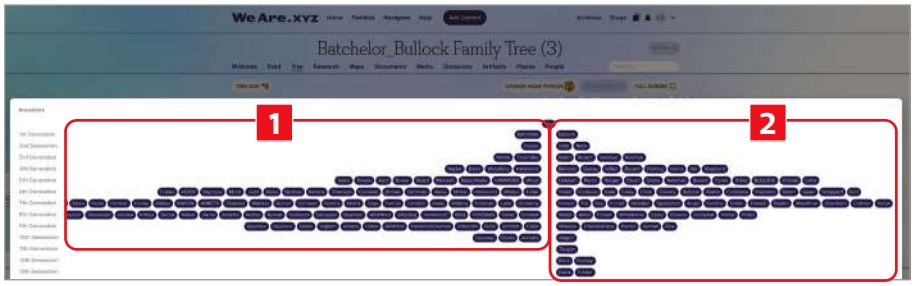
Grow Your Family Tree

If you're seeking a simple way of building and sharing a tree, follow **Judith Batchelor's** advice to...

Create a genealogy archive on WeAre.xyz

One of the easiest ways to create and share your family tree is on the UK-based website We.Are.xyz (www.weare.xyz). At £4.99 a month or £49 a year, we think the 'Archiver' package is fantastic value, giving you 100GB of storage space, and letting you invite up to 10 members to contribute. If that's not enough, there are Plus and Unlimited packages offering more.

To see if it does what you want, sign up for a free 30-day trial. We'll explain how it works here, but you'll also find help on its YouTube channel: www.snipca.com/53063. For inspiration, read founder Simon Davies' story of how the site began: www.snipca.com/53193.



Paternal lines are shown on the left and maternal lines on the right

Upload your tree

You can start your tree from scratch or upload your existing tree as a GEDCOM file. Now click Archives at the top, then 'Create new archive'. Now choose to make your archive public (so it appears in searches on the site) or private (so only people you invite can see it).

You're now ready to add information – such as a census record, photos or certificates (birth, marriage and death) – using the same tabs that appear on the Home page. Once you've done this, click the Share button to share it with family members. Also click the 'Ask Family' button to share a direct link to your page. The 'Add Content' button in the top menu is another way of easily creating content.

Click 'Families' at the top to see family names in your tree. Your paternal lines will be displayed on the left (1 in our screenshot above) and your maternal lines on the right 2. You can also click 'Navigator' in the top menu to locate a person or family quickly.

Judith transcribed the will of her ancestor John Ford, which he made in 1855

Add tags and transcribe documents

You should always try to add tags to your tree. These are bits of information that group themes, such as locations, occupations, people or events. Searching for a tag helps you make connections between themes in your tree.

Upload a document to We.Are.xyz and you can add tags for families, individuals, artefacts, " This Magazine Free on S o f t A r c h i v e i s " occasions and places that may appear on it.

You can also crop pages when you upload them and add a transcription alongside the original record. I did this when I uploaded the will of my ancestor, John Ford (in our screenshot above left), which he made in 1855. Click the Documents tab, then Upload Document. Now add a title and the appropriate tags, then click Add Page Images to upload your document. Now click the will to type your transcription, which appears . on the right

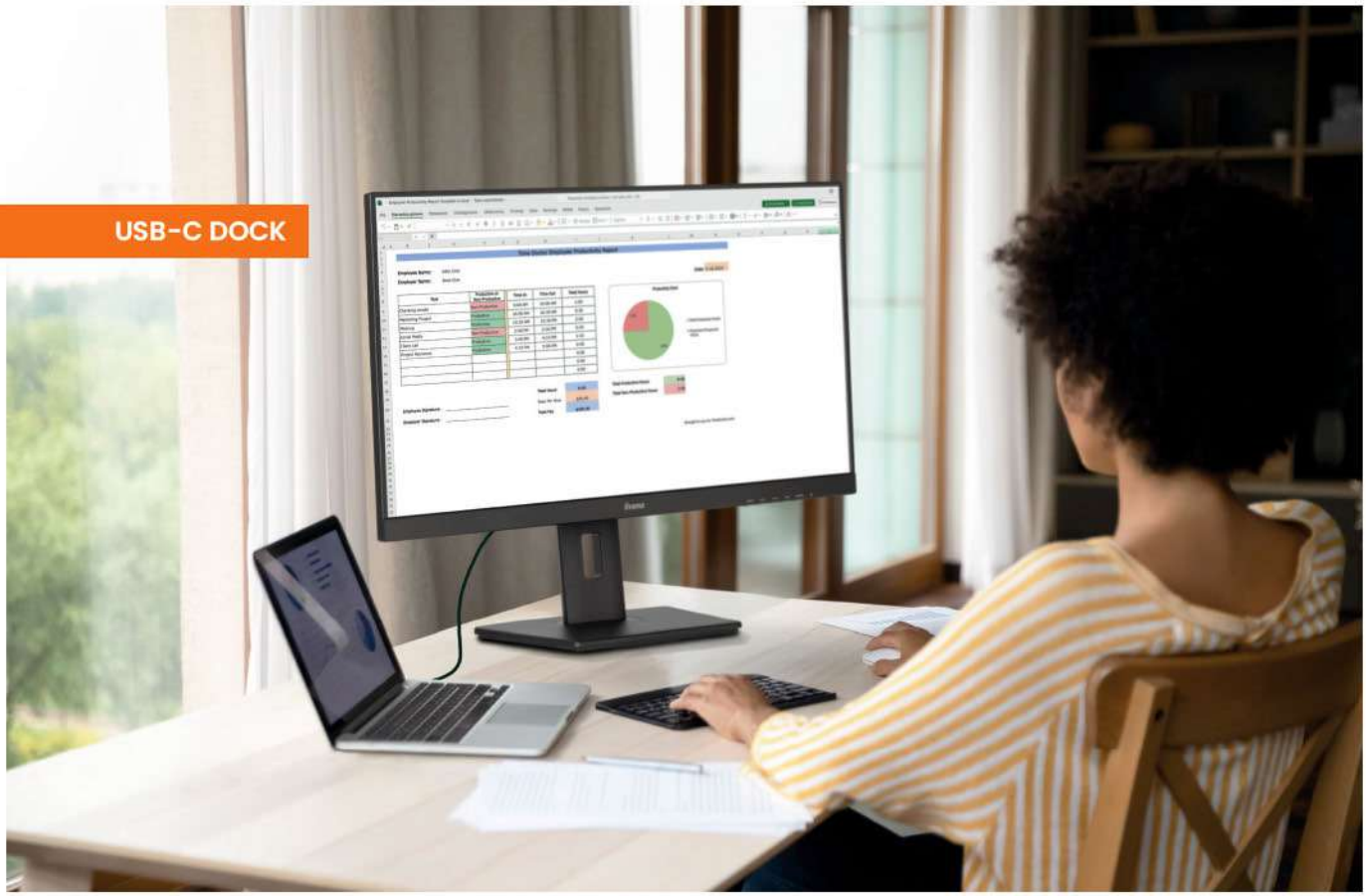
Your Genealogy Problems Solved

I have ancestors who moved to the US in the 1940s. Do you know if they would've appeared yet in any online censuses?

Diana Granville

Yes, they may have been in the 1950 US Federal Census, available to search for free online at the US National Archives (www.snipca.com/53191). Search for the first and last name of the head of the household, plus the state and county of residence if known. The search engine will return any close variations or matches. Once you have found a record of interest, click the buttons or links to view a digitised copy. Also read FamilySearch's breakdown of the questions: www.snipca.com/53192.

Have a genealogy question for Judith? Email letters@computeractive.co.uk with 'Grow Your Family Tree' in the subject line.



USB-C DOCK

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Best Free Software

Robert Irvine recommends new programs that won't cost you a thing

DIGITAL ART TOOL

FotoSketcher 3.97

www.snipca.com/53248
What you need: Windows 7, 8.1, 10 or 11

Software that turns your photos into art by applying stylised effects is usually expensive, complicated or both. Although there are now AI tools that transform your pictures at the click of a button, they tend to be resource-intensive and limit the number or quality of images you can convert.

FotoSketcher avoids all these problems, offering a free, simple and unlimited way to make ordinary photos look like oil paintings, watercolours or pencil sketches. The program takes care of all the complex processing, letting you create stunning results with minimal effort.

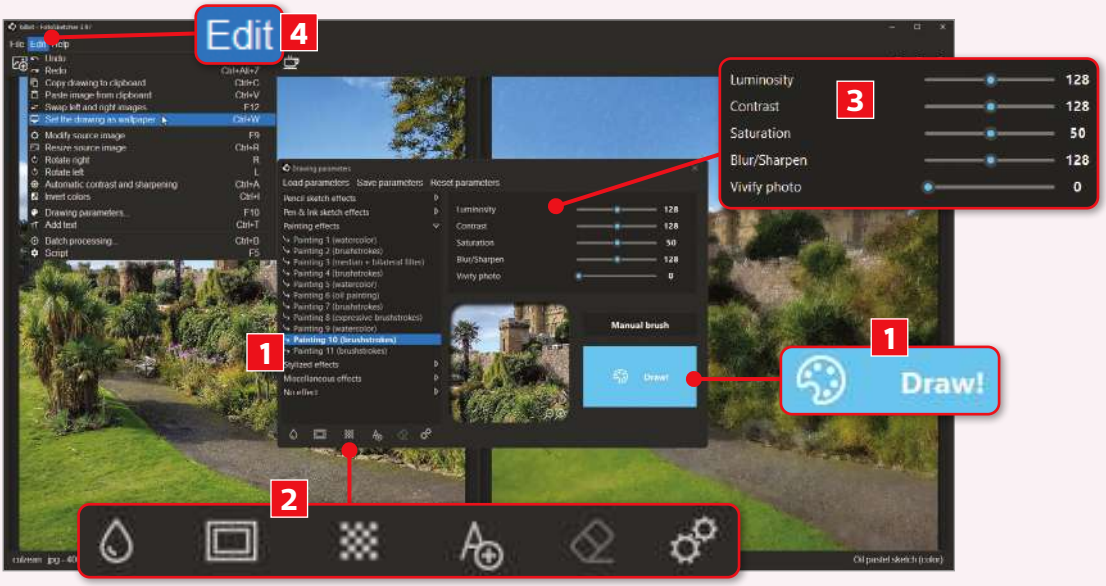
The FotoSketcher interface is split into two, with the left side showing your source image and the right offering a preview of the edited picture based on your chosen filters and effects. Click the 'Drawing parameters' (paint palette) button to choose from a wide range of pencil, paint and ink effects, as well as interesting options such as Cartoon and 'Vintage photo'.

You can customise each effect to achieve the desired results – for example, by selecting the minimum size of brush strokes, the precision of oil pastels and the length of pencil lines. If you want to experiment, you can try using a manual brush to apply an effect to just a portion of your photo.

The latest version of FotoSketcher gives its layout a more modern feel and significantly improves its 'No effect' option. Previously, this simply copied the left-hand image to the right-hand side, so you could apply non-creative tweaks such as adding a frame, changing the canvas texture and inserting text.

Now it lets you modify the luminosity, contrast, colour saturation, sharpness and vividness of the source photo, as you can in a standard image editor. FotoSketcher has also fixed a bug that could cause it to crash when processing pictures.

When you install FotoSketcher, Microsoft Defender SmartScreen may show a security warning. The program is completely safe to use, so just click 'More info' then 'Run anyway'.



1 The 'Drawing parameters' panel is the most important feature in FotoSketcher, giving you access to all its effects. Select one in the list on the left to see a preview of how it will look, then click the Draw button to apply it to your photo.

2 The options in the bottom-left corner of the panel let you add a frame to your photo (choose a size, style and colour) and adjust the canvas texture. You can also add text such as your name, a caption or a copyright notice.

3 FotoSketcher 3.97 expands the 'No effect' option to let you fine-tune your photos without applying effects. Use the sliders to adjust the luminosity, contrast and colour saturation; blur or sharpen the image; and make it more vivid.

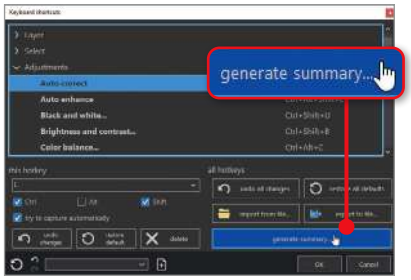
4 Further options in the Edit menu include rotating photos, swapping the left and right images and applying automatic contrast and sharpening. FotoSketcher also lets you set pictures as desktop wallpaper.

IMAGE EDITOR

PhotoDemon 24.12

www.snipca.com/53208

What you need: Windows 7, 8.1, 10 or 11



The latest update to this excellent free image editor adds a couple of features that make it even more versatile and easy to use. One is the ability to open and save images in the HEIC and HEIF formats used by iPhones and some DSLR cameras. The other lets you create custom keyboard shortcuts for actions you perform frequently. Click the Tools menu and choose 'Keyboard shortcuts' to open the full list of commands, which are organised by menu – such as File, Edit, Adjustments and Effects. Assign hotkeys to items in bold by pressing the keyboard shortcuts you want to use. PhotoDemon will tell you if that hotkey is already assigned to another action. Click 'generate summary' (see screenshot) to save an HTML file of your hotkey collection. Click 'More info' then 'Run anyway' if you get a SmartScreen warning during installation.

PDF EDITOR

PDFgear 2.1.10

www.snipca.com/53209

What you need: Windows 10 or 11, or macOS

PDFgear was one of your favourite programs of 2024 (see our Cover Feature on page 50 to find out where it ranked) and managed to squeeze in another update just before the year ended. To "streamline workflow", it has finally introduced support for keyboard shortcuts, so you can perform common actions much faster. Unlike PhotoDemon (see above), you can't customise these hotkeys, but you can see the full list by clicking the Help tab then Settings and selecting Shortcuts. Just as useful is the new right-click menu for PDFs, which gives you instant access to options such as Edit Text (see screenshot), Merge & Split PDF, Delete Pages, OCR and 'Convert to'. PDFgear has also improved its dark mode and added 'tooltips' to menu buttons, which explain their function when you hover your cursor over them and give you their keyboard shortcut where available.

£ SHOULD I PAY FOR...?

Choose the right version of software

FileSeek Pro

www.snipca.com/53212

Price: $19 (£15) **Free trial period:** 30 days

What you need: Windows 10 or 11

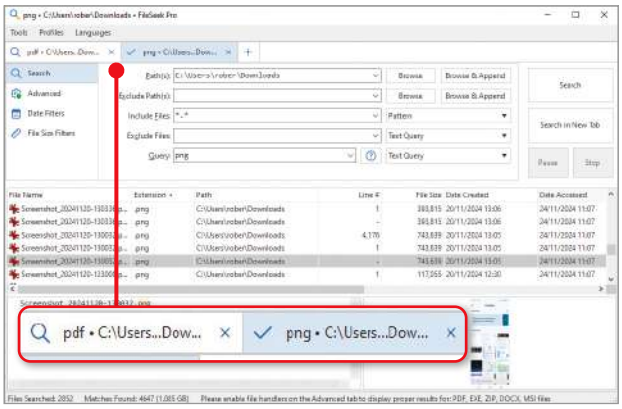
We're always on the lookout for alternatives to the unreliable file-search tool built into Windows, and FileSeek is a worthy contender. It has lots of useful options to help you find files quickly, and it doesn't slow your PC by 'indexing' in the background.

The Pro edition has a generous free trial that lets you test all FileSeek's features for a month before it reverts to the Free version. Unlike many freemium tools, it doesn't nag you to upgrade and there are only a few differences between editions.

Both versions allow you to search any folder or drive, with options to search only for items created or modified within a specific time frame, set minimum and maximum file sizes and look inside text files as well as their names.

FileSeek's searches are impressively fast and thorough. You can filter its detailed results by criteria including extension, size and date, and it provides previews for image files. We particularly like the way you can integrate the program with File Explorer's right-click menu, so you can search folders without launching FileSeek first.

The Pro version includes the useful option to open searches in multiple tabs (see screenshot), which is probably the only feature you'll miss when your trial ends. It also lets you export search results as an HTML or CSV file, and save your search settings as a profile.



OUR VERDICT: Don't pay for it

Other than tabbed searches, the free version of FileSeek offers everything you need to find files quickly across your PC. The Pro edition doesn't give you much more for your money, though in fairness it's relatively inexpensive.

What should I download?

We advise you which software and apps to use

How can I see all my passwords?

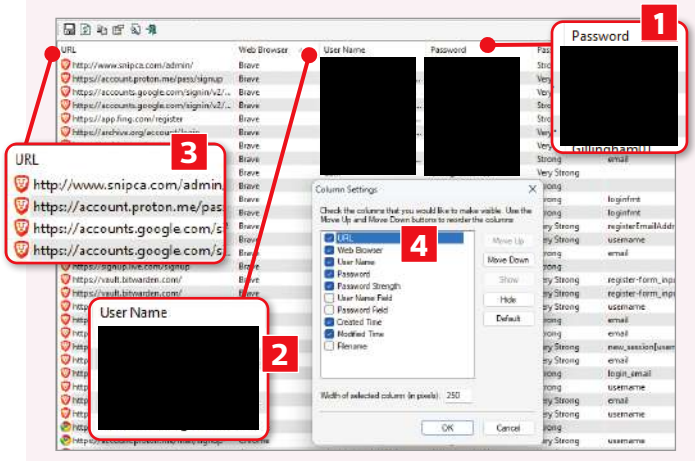
Q Thanks to *Computeractive*'s recommendations I now use Brave, Opera, Edge and Firefox to browse the web, as well as Chrome. I love having this choice, but I often forget the passwords I need for specific sites and accounts. Is there a program that can help?

Eric Bullen

A Yes, it's called WebBrowserPassView, and is made by NirSoft, developer of several excellent programs we've recommended over the years. Visit www.snipca.com/53080, then scroll down and click the download link below the Feedback heading. Also make a note of the ZIP file password (wbpv28821@) – you'll need to type this to run the program. You'll also need to click 'More info' then 'Run anyway' to bypass Microsoft Defender's SmartScreen warning.

As well as showing your passwords (1 in our screenshot – redacted here for security reasons), the program reveals your usernames 2, your password strength and when they were created. Click the top of each column to sort the results alphabetically. We've done that in our screenshot, which is why all the URLs are for Brave 3. Passwords that start with numbers or special characters appear above those starting with letters.

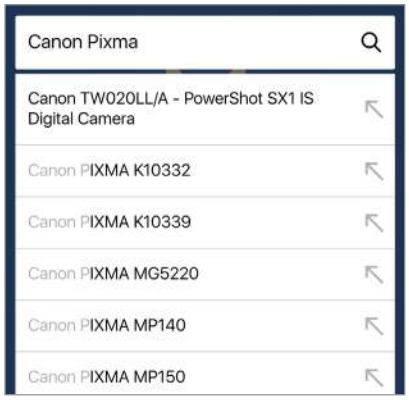
If you find the list hard to read, click View at the top and select Show Grid Lines and/or Mark Odd/Even Rows. This will increase the contrast between the rows, as our screenshot shows. You can also remove any columns you don't need – click View, Choose Columns then untick any of the boxes 4 and click OK.



Can I view product manuals on my phone?

Q In my part-time job I often attempt to fix old devices like printers, webcams, laptops and so on. I need to access manuals for these on my Android phone, but searching for them is a pain. Is there an app I could use instead?

Christopher Moss



A There is – it's called Manualslib (free from www.snipca.com/49782). It has 2.7 million user guides and manuals for products from over 50,000 manufacturers (there are even more at www.manualslib.com). As you type it will suggest products below (see screenshot). You can filter results by brand, manual type and product category.

What software can I use to scan with my Canon printer?

Q My Windows 10 PC came with scanning software ArcSoft PhotoStudio, which I use on my Canon MG3650 printer. I recently bought a new Canon MG25505 printer which doesn't work with ArcSoft. I find scanning with what was supplied unsatisfactory. What can I use instead?

Mike Wood

A One of the best replacements for ArcSoft is VueScan (pictured), which works with over 7,700 scanner models – including many that are now discontinued – from more than 40 manufacturers. There's a free trial that leaves watermarks on scans, but if you like it we'd recommend buying the Basic (£24.95) or Standard (£49.95) edition – see www.snipca.com/53082 for details.

Named & Shamed

Keumars Afifi-Sabet puts the boot into tech villains, jargon-spouting companies and software trying to trick you

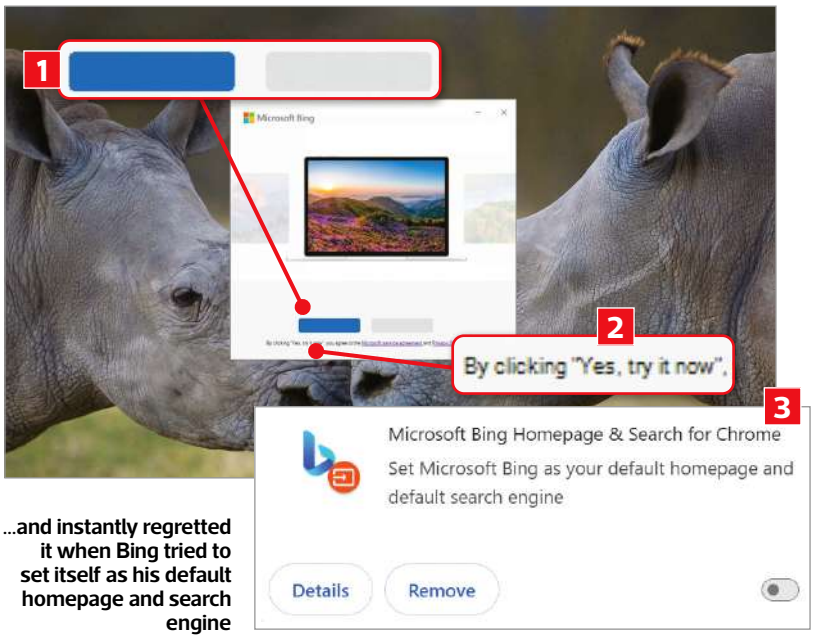
SOFTWARE WARNING!

Malware-like trash from Bing Wallpaper app

I'm always looking for stunning wallpaper images for my PC's desktop, so was interested in Microsoft's Bing Wallpaper app (a "collection of beautiful images from around the world"). It's just been made available as an app on the Microsoft Store. Visit its page (www.snipca.com/53166) and you'll see some of those beautiful images, including Tuscan villages, the Taj Mahal and walruses swimming in the Arctic. Lovely.

But what you don't see on the page – and only appears once you've installed the app – is a baffling screen with two blank buttons (1 in our screenshot) and a tiny message saying 'Yes, try it now' 2. I assumed the blue button needed clicking, so did just that. But I had a bad feeling about it.

Sure enough, Bing Wallpaper is a minefield of unwanted options and nasty extras. When you first run the app it asks you to make Bing the default homepage and search engine in Edge, Firefox and Chrome 3.



Any idea which button to press? Keumars tried the blue one...

...and instantly regretted it when Bing tried to set itself as his default homepage and search engine

It also recommends making Edge the default browser and turning on the Bing Search extension for it, and automatically installs Bing Visual Search (Microsoft's second-rate equivalent of Google Lens). What a mess.

Bing Wallpaper would have to show me photos of seven-eyed aliens on Neptune to make it worth the hassle of using the app. It's complete trash, behaving just as I'd expect malware to.

Ignore it and try something like John's Background Switcher (www.snipca.com/48839). It's free, has loads of great images, and doesn't treat your computer with contempt.

WHAT ARE THEY TALKING ABOUT?

WHAT THEY SAY

Lenovo

www.snipca.com/53121

"ThinkShield Firmware Assurance is one of the only computer OEM solutions to enable deep visibility and protection below the operating system (OS) by embracing Zero Trust Architecture (ZTA) component-level visibility to generate more accurate and actionable risk management insights."

WHAT THEY MEAN

Our top 'actionable' insight is that nobody understands jargon like this, but everyone's too scared to say so.

KEUMARS' VILLAIN OF THE FORTNIGHT

Ekaterina Zhdanova

As we've seen many times on this page, fraudsters love showing off the lifestyle funded by their ill-gotten gains. So it's no surprise to see Ekaterina Zhdanova posing like a Bond girl on an expensive skiing holiday somewhere. She's actually the head of Moscow-based money-laundering network Smart, making her sound more like a Bond villain.

It offered cryptocurrency stolen in ransomware attacks around the world to drug smugglers in 30 countries, including the UK. This allowed the gangs to convert dirty cash into money they could spend cleanly.

The operation has been uncovered by the National Crime Agency, which has seized around £20m in cash. Several couriers of the cash have been jailed too. But Zhdanova, although sanctioned by the US, is still at large. Maybe start by checking the apres-ski?

DESKTOP PC | **£999** from PCSpecialist www.snipca.com/53170

PCSpecialist Zircon Supreme R

Fan-tastic

If you're going to spend a lot of money on your next PC, then it makes sense to get something that's good at everything you might throw at it. For some people that may only be office tasks and web browsing, in which case an affordable model will suffice. If you also expect to run processor-hungry tasks such as video editing, and maybe load up the odd game such as Microsoft Flight Simulator, then it's worth spending a bit more.

The PCSpecialist Zircon Supreme R falls into this do-it-all camp. It pairs a decent Nvidia GeForce RTX 4060 graphics card with a cutting-edge AMD Ryzen 5 9600X processor, and it happily runs most software at a decent rate of knots.

For example, we tested it with several games running with high graphical settings at a resolution of 1440p, and it averaged a frame rate of 104fps. That's already impressive, but drop this to 1080p and games become incredibly smooth.

In general Windows performance we were impressed with the power of the Ryzen 5 9600X. In tests that push it to its limits, it can't quite keep up with the scores we've seen from new Ryzen 7, Ryzen 9 and Intel Ultra 9 chips, but including one of these would certainly push the price of this machine over the £1,000 mark. It's a compromise we're willing to accept.

The closest PC to this that we've tested previously is the Palicomp AMD Destiny (£1,350 from www.snipca.com/51529, reviewed in Issue 691). This takes another step up in terms of the graphics card with an RTX 4070, but uses an older processor – the AMD Ryzen 7 7800X3D.

The Zircon runs games slightly faster than the AMD Destiny, though there isn't a great deal in it, unless you wanted to take your gaming up to 4K resolutions, in which case it's worth the upgrade. General PC performance is also similar, meaning the Zircon will be better value for money for most people.

> "A solid, all-round PC that can take on most games and shines at everyday Windows work"

The chassis is solid rather than exceptional. It's one of PCSpecialist's own-brand cases, with a mesh metal front through which the RGB fans shine (as pictured above right), and though it doesn't exude style, it's a reasonable choice for the price. It helps that the tempered glass side panel stretches all the way across, providing an unimpeded view to the tidy internal cabling (pictured left).

Things aren't so neat if you remove the metallic right-hand panel, which you'll need to do if you want to add a 3.5in drive. There's only one 3.5in space, though there is room above to screw in two 2.5in drives. In fact, that's your only option for adding more storage, because the Asus Prime A620M-K motherboard includes only one M.2 SSD slot, which PCSpecialist has occupied with the supplied 1TB drive.

It has also chosen to fill both RAM sockets, so you can't add more in future, unless you're prepared to throw away what you've got and buy larger replacements.

SPECIFICATIONS

Six-core AMD Ryzen 5 9600X processor • 16GB RAM • 8GB Nvidia GeForce RTX4060 graphics card • 1TB SSD • Windows 11 Home • 208x400x458mm (HxWxD) • Three-year warranty www.snipca.com/53170

VERDICT A finely balanced PC that will perform well with almost any task you care to take on, from games to general Windows work

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE Palicomp AMD Destiny £1,350 Even more powerful graphics if gaming is your thing

LAPTOP | **£1,099** from Currys www.snipca.com/53086

LG Gram SuperSlim 15.6in

Light relief

There are a number of impressive features about this LG laptop. The first thing we noticed was just how light it is. At 999g, it's impressively portable for a model with a 15.6in screen. For comparison, it's a full 500g lighter than the MSI Prestige 16 AI Studio (£1,200 from www.snipca.com/52708, reviewed in Issue 698), which has a similar-sized screen.

> "Wonderfully slim with a stunning screen, though not as fast as our favourite laptop"

Talking of which, the screen is one of this laptop's standout features. Based on OLED technology, it has eye-catching contrast levels and excellent colour accuracy, hitting a remarkable 99 per cent of the DCI-P3 standard. That makes it ideal for watching movies, and editing videos and photos. It's bright, too, going up to a maximum of 404cd/m², meaning you can see onscreen details in all lighting conditions.

The design is particularly impressive. It certainly lives up to its SuperSlim name at 12.6mm, but still feels very well built. The lid flexes a little, but the rest is made of metal and feels robust. To cap off its sleek stylings, it has a classy deep blue finish.

That slim design does mean the keys don't travel too far when pressed, but we were more than happy typing on it. The keyboard is spacious, allowing for plenty of room around the keys, and there's a separate number pad. The Enter key is standard height, where we generally prefer it spread across two rows of keys, but it's still easy enough to find with your little finger. The trackpad is slightly too small at 110x70mm, but its glass surface makes for smoother navigation and it's very responsive. The speakers are solid, with plenty of audio detail and even a hint of bass.

While this might sound close to perfection, there's one thing that stands in the way of a five-star review. Because the laptop is so slim, LG hasn't been able to push Intel's Core Ultra 7 155H processor to its full potential. This is the same chip that sits in our current favourite laptop – the Dell Inspiron 14 Plus 7440 (£699 from www.snipca.com/51831, see page 30), yet it performs slightly slower across all our benchmark tests. That's disappointing if you're looking for high performance at the lowest possible price, but if you'd prefer a superior screen and slimmer design, this LG model is well worth considering.

SPECIFICATIONS

Sixteen-core Intel Core 7 155H processor • 16GB RAM • Intel Arc graphics • 15.6in 1920x1080-pixel OLED screen • 1TB SSD • 3x USB-C ports • Wi-Fi 6 • Bluetooth 5.3 • Windows 11 Home • 12.6x356x227mm (HxWxD) • 999g • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/53086

RIGHT EDGE

LEFT EDGE

HOW WE TEST

Computeractive is owned by Future PLC, which employs a team of specialist technical reviewers. You'll often read references to our benchmark testing, which is a method of assessing products using the same criteria. For example, we test the speed of every PC and the battery life of every phone and tablet in exactly the same way. This makes our reviews authoritative, rigorous and accurate.

Future PLC also owns the magazines *Maximum PC*, *PC Pro* and *T3*, and the websites Laptop Mag (www.laptopmag.com), TechRadar (www.techradar.com) and Windows Central (www.windowscentral.com). This means we can test thousands of products before choosing the most relevant for *Computeractive*.

FAIR AND IMPARTIAL

Our writers follow strict guidelines to ensure the reviews are fair and impartial. The manufacturer has no involvement in our tests.

OUR AWARDS

We award every product that gets five stars our Buy It! stamp of approval. It means we were extremely impressed by the product, and we think you will be too.

Every product that gets a four-star review is given the Recommended award. We highly recommend these products, although they just fail to meet the high standard of our Buy It! winners.

PRICES

Our reviews contain a link to the best price we found online at the time of press.

VERDICT An eye-catching, high-quality screen and a slick, luxurious lightweight design

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE MSI Prestige 16 AI Studio £1,200 More expensive, but it includes an Nvidia GeForce RTX 4060 graphics card, giving it a significant boost when handling resource-hungry programs

PRINTER | **£193** from Amazon www.snipca.com/53101

HP OfficeJet Pro 9135e

The joy of text

The HP OfficeJet Pro 9135e isn't an everyday printer for people who like to print a few photos and the odd letter. However, if you use a printer for working from home, or simply want a range of features for producing high-quality documents, copies, homework and more, this is a multifunction model that should satisfy your needs for a reasonable price.

> "A fast printer that produces excellent text and vibrant photos"

Despite its attractive price it goes well beyond the basics. Its scanner is equipped with a 35-sheet automatic document feeder that can handle multi-page scans, photocopies and faxes (anyone under a certain age may need to look that one up). Both scanner and printer support automatic double-sided processing (while a few printers still *print* on both sides, duplex scanning is rare).

It has two 250-sheet paper trays, so you can divide an entire ream of paper across the two, or separate plain paper from photo, headed or coloured paper to save you having to shuffle your stationery around from one to another. It supports both Wi-Fi and wired connections.

With a large 4.3in colour touchscreen (pictured below left), it's easy to control any jobs you may have. These may include handling scans to – or prints from – a network drive, or a USB stick plugged into the printer's USB port. You can also scan or print from Google Drive or OneDrive, but only using the HP Smart app, which is available for Windows, Android and iOS (www.snipca.com/53112).

The OfficeJet Pro 9135e uses cartridges rather than ink tanks, but manages to eke out a decent number of prints from these. HP's largest 'EvoMore' cartridges are rated for 2,500 black pages, or 1,650 for each colour, which is generous for a cartridge inkjet.

At the time of writing, colour running costs worked out at a reasonable 6p per page, while mono prints cost 2p. That's not extortionate, but it's more expensive than an ink tank. HP offers an optional subscription service, but it can't better the standalone cartridge prices and may cost more if you don't use your full quota.

Setting up the printer is the most annoying thing about this machine. During the initial setup, the screen displays a QR code that leads to an online quick-start guide. That sounds like a great idea, but it's not as practical as just showing instructions on the screen. The HP Smart app also lacks TWAIN drivers, which you'll need to import scans from image-editing software – you'll have to find these yourself. The app also pushes HP's cartridges with the promise of extra tools with its HP+ subscription service (www.snipca.com/53132), but you can simply opt out of this.

Happily, such frustrations are forgotten once you start using it. First off, it's very fast, churning out a standard letter at 22.1 pages per minute (ppm). It also managed 8ppm on our challenging colour-graphics test. Like all inkjets, the 9135e slows down when printing on two sides to allow for drying time – it achieved only 3.7ppm in this mode. Copying is also fast, producing a single mono copy in eight seconds and colour in 11 seconds.

Text quality is excellent with bold black characters and exceedingly crisp outlines. Colour graphics aren't the punchiest we've seen from an inkjet, but they're perfectly fine and free of banding and grainy textures.

More surprisingly, this is a pretty good photo printer. Its pigment inks tend to sit on the surface of photo paper, producing a slightly over-glossy finish, but otherwise snaps were reproduced with accurate colours, a reasonable amount of contrast and fine detail.

SPECIFICATIONS

4-in-1 printer, copier, scanner and fax • A4 size • Four-ink cartridge system (1x black, 3x colour) • 500-sheet paper capacity (2x 250-sheet paper trays) • 1200x4800dpi print quality • 1200x1200dpi scan quality • Colour touchscreen • USB, Ethernet and Wi-Fi connections • 318x437x396mm • 11.8kg • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/53101

VERDICT A workhorse of a printer for the home office that makes printing jobs quicker and easier than most of its inkjet rivals

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE Epson EcoTank ET-2830 £215 Similar basic features with low print costs from its ink tanks, but it lacks paper trays and sheet feeders

TABLET | **£500** from Honor www.snipca.com/53150

Honor MagicPad2

Walks on Air

If you've been tempted into spending £799 on a 13in iPad Air (www.snipca.com/53151), perhaps because you fancy a tablet with a larger screen, take a moment to consider this more affordable Android alternative.

Chinese firm Honor has made some of the best budget Android tablets around, including the Honor Pad 9 (£220 from www.snipca.com/49958, reviewed in Issue 682) and the Honor Pad X9 (£130 from www.snipca.com/48636, reviewed in Issue 674). This offering, the MagicPad2, is larger and more expensive, but it's still £300 less than the cheapest similarly sized iPad.

We also think it's better value for money than the 11in Samsung Galaxy S9 (£799 from www.snipca.com/50039, reviewed in Issue 667), as it has a larger screen and similar performance for less money, making it our new Buy It recommendation.

It's a slim 275x181mm unit, under 6mm thick and weighing just 555g. It takes its design cues from the iPad Air, though it's a tad thicker and heavier, and the metal shell – available in black or white – doesn't feel quite as premium.

Its screen, however, is superb. It's a 12.3in OLED panel with a 3000x1920-pixel resolution. It's also bright, reaching highs of 581cd/m², and text looks brilliantly sharp and clean. You get the flawless contrast of OLED, plus it covers 100 per cent of the sRGB standard and nearly 91 per cent of DCI-P3.

Honor's MagicOS interface sits somewhere between iPadOS and standard Android, with a dock at the bottom of the screen and several pages of apps. Honor pre-installs its own software, including Notes, Email, Honor Health and an Honor Docs office app, along with its own App Market, though there's little reason to use it instead of the Google Play Store, which is also available. MagicOS does a solid job of multitasking, including floating windows, simple task-switching and easy-to-use split-screen views.

> "A superb screen, excellent speeds and a long-running battery at a reasonable price"

In benchmark tests it proved to be one of the fastest tablets we've ever tested, only slightly behind the most expensive Apple and Samsung tablets.

Its 10,050mAh battery kept going for nearly 18 hours of video playback, leaving those top-end tablets in the shade. Running the screen at maximum brightness will reduce that battery life, but this is a device that won't need daily charging unless you're using it all day.

VERDICT A large Android tablet with an expansive 12.3in screen that's significantly cheaper than the nearest iPad with barely any compromises

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE Apple iPad Air 13in £799 If you want the nearest iPad you'll have to spend more, but it's slightly faster and there's still no better tablet operating system than iPadOS

SPECIFICATIONS

Eight-core Qualcomm Snapdragon 8s Gen 3 processor • 12GB RAM • 256GB memory • 12.3in 3000x1920-pixel OLED touchscreen • 13-megapixel rear camera • 9-megapixel front-facing camera • Wi-Fi 6 • Bluetooth 5.3 • Android 14 with MagicOS 8 • 181x275x5.8mm (HxWxD) • 555g • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/53150

CHOOSE THE RIGHT SPECS

Local dimming

What is it?

Local dimming is a technology designed to improve contrast on IPS screens on computers and TVs (like the TCL C645K, pictured) so that it's closer to the levels you see on OLED screens. While OLED panels illuminate individual pixels to switch between brilliant white and perfect black (and every colour in between), IPS screens use a shared light across a number of pixels to create colours.

How does it work?

It works by increasing the number of shared lights and assigning each one to a different section of the screen. Cheaper IPS screens that don't use local dimming have just one light to illuminate the pixels from behind. If that light needs to be at full brightness to create white areas, any black sections are likely to look a little grey. Screens with local dimming, on the other hand, can lighten up sections of the screen that need it, while toning down areas that don't.

What are the specs?

There are two main types of local dimming. There's an 'edge lit' option that disperses light to the front of the screen from the edges. This makes vivid colours brighter, which can create better contrast. Then there's 'full array' dimming, which uses a group of lights behind the screen, with each one illuminating a specific area. This can improve contrast levels even more because it allows parts of the screen to be much brighter than others, allowing for both bright and dark sections simultaneously.

Can I change it later?

No. This is an integral feature of a monitor or TV, and can't be upgraded at a later date.

EBOOK READER | **£95** from Amazon www.snipca.com/53137

Amazon Kindle (2024)

On the same page

Amazon isn't claiming this is a giant leap forward from the previous version of the basic Kindle, launched in 2022 (reviewed in Issue 647), which was the 11th generation of the ebook reader. And while there are minor improvements in this latest model, they clearly aren't enough to justify calling this 12th generation. Think of it as 11 and a bit.

> "The slight boost in performance and brightness doesn't justify this upgrade"

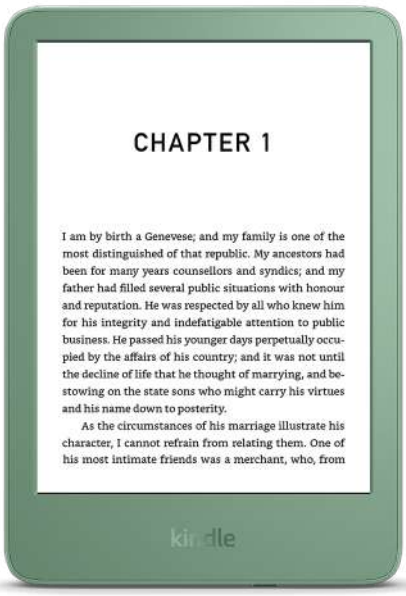
Although Amazon doesn't reveal which screen technology this model uses, we compared it with the new Kindle Paperwhite and the Kobo Clara BW and concluded that it's an E Ink Carta 1200 panel, which is identical to the 2022 model.

That said, the screen can go around 25-per-cent brighter, probably due to an extra LED. You'll only really need it this bright if you're trying to read outside on a sunny day. Bear in mind though that it's not ideal for taking on the beach because it lacks any protection from water or dust.

It also steps up from the 2022 model in performance. We noticed that it's faster when flipping through pages and changing settings in the menus, but it's not enough of a boost to justify upgrading if you already have the previous model. As you'll see from the model pictured, it's also now available in a new colour (Matcha Green).

Like the previous model, there's still only 16GB of storage. While that's plenty for hundreds of ebooks and a few audiobooks, only 11.5GB of that is available for use. Amazon has done something with the operating system that's using approximately 2GB more than on the 2022 edition.

If you're serious about ebooks we'd recommend the new Kindle Paperwhite (£160 from www.snipca.com/52730, reviewed in Issue 698) – it has a larger, better screen and more storage space for books. If that's too expensive, the Kobo Clara BW (£120 from www.snipca.com/50981, reviewed in Issue 687) is also a better buy – costing just a few pounds more for a superior E Ink Carta 1300 screen.


CHAPTER 1
I am by birth a Genevese; and my family is one of the most distinguished of that republic. My ancestors had been for many years counsellors and syndics; and my father had filled several public situations with honour and reputation. He was respected by all who knew him for his integrity and indefatigable attention to public business. He passed his younger days perpetually occupied by the affairs of his country; and it was not until the decline of life that he thought of marrying, and bestowing on the state sons who might carry his virtues and his name down to posterity.
As the circumstances of his marriage illustrate his character, I cannot refrain from relating them. One of his most intimate friends was a merchant, who, from
kindle

SPECIFICATIONS
6in 300ppi E Ink Carta 1200 touchscreen • 16GB storage • Wi-Fi 4 • USB-C charging port • 158x109x8mm (HxWxD) • 158g • One-year warranty
www.snipca.com/53137

VERDICT A disappointing update to Amazon's cheapest Kindle, unless you're particularly keen on the new colour

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE Kobo Clara BW £120 Slightly more expensive, but the higher-quality screen makes it worth the extra

WHAT SHOULD I BUY? We solve your buying dilemmas

Can you suggest an Android phone with physical keys?

Q My wife swears by her BlackBerry KeyOne and its physical keyboard, but it's on its last legs. I'd like to get her something similar and wondered if anyone is making decent Android phones with physical keys?

Rob Cross

A Sadly, phones with physical built-in keyboards are few and far between. However, there is one option that's worth considering. It's called the Unihertz Titan Slim (pictured) and is available from Amazon for £260 at www.snipca.com/53136.

It first appeared in 2022, so is five years younger than the Blackberry KeyOne.

Though we haven't tested the phone, reviews on Amazon and elsewhere suggest that it's a pretty good alternative to a BlackBerry device, with its durable battery and slim design.

Unfortunately, it's unlikely the phone will be getting get any Android updates, including security updates, so there's an element of risk to using this device. However, it's arguably less risky than using a phone from 2017.

Do you need advice on what you should buy? Email us at letters@computeractive.co.uk

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Meeting Owl® 4+

PC PRO TECHNOLOGY EXCELLENCE AWARDS 2024
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OWL LABS

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VIDEO DOORBELL | **£170** from Swann www.snipca.com/53116

Swann SwannBuddy4K

Thanks for the memory

Australian manufacturer Swann was making security cameras long before the likes of Amazon and Google got in on the act. Now it's extending its expertise into the world of video doorbells with the SwannBuddy4K. While it looks similar to many of its rivals, there are a few ways in which it splits from the herd.

First, it comes with a 32GB memory card and therefore doesn't need a subscription – though there's a £3.99-a-month option if you also want to store footage online. The microSD card slots into the case and then stores footage until it runs out of room and then begins to overwrite what's on there. That provides ample time to save anything important elsewhere, though it can support cards up to 128GB if you need longer. We've seen subscription-free cameras before, but none that come as well equipped as this one.

Second, as well as having a small built-in speaker, it comes with a wireless, battery-powered chime unit you can position anywhere in your house. This means you don't need your smartphone with you to know that someone is at your door. This has several sound options, including a barking dog, which might help deter unwelcome guests.

We found the quality of recorded video footage excellent. Video is captured in portrait mode, rather than landscape like most doorbells – we preferred this because most of the time we check recorded footage on our smartphones, so it fits the screen better. It has a 165-degree field of view and works well in daylight and at night, and supports two-way audio.

SPECIFICATIONS
4K video resolution • Rechargeable battery • 165-degree field of view • Requires 2.5GHz Wi-Fi • 140x55x32mm (HxWxD) • 213g • Two-year warranty
www.snipca.com/53116

VERDICT A subscription-free doorbell with memory card included, which saves high-quality footage day and night

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE Eufy Security Video Doorbell E340 £150 A video doorbell with a second camera to keep an eye on deliveries

FITNESS WATCH | **From £110** from Huawei www.snipca.com/53117

Huawei Watch Fit 3

Lay to wrist

If you like the styling of the Apple Watch but don't want to pay Apple prices, Huawei has you covered. This third-generation fitness tracker has ditched the round face of previous models and taken inspiration from Apple's squarer design, which gives it a smart, sophisticated look.

The watch pairs with both Android and iOS phones. It syncs with the Huawei Health app, which you can use to keep track of things such as heart rate and step count. It also recognises more than 100 types of exercise, including running, walking, cycling and swimming, so can log them automatically.

The Fit 3 also offers a range of handy smartwatch features, including a weather widget and a wide choice of watch faces. Each of these is masterfully designed and works seamlessly with the rest of the watch. We also like how notifications are sent straight to the watch, bypassing the phone. This was handy while cycling because it meant we didn't have to mount our phone on our bike, but it can be just as useful walking around town.

Huawei quotes battery life at around 10 days, but in our tests it lasted 14, which is impressive. For comparison, Fitbits tend to last between four and 10 days, while Apple Watches need charging every night.

Using the link above takes you to the £170 watch, with a 'Milanese' design. You'll need to choose a different colour for the £110 price.

SPECIFICATIONS
1.82in AMOLED screen • 480x408-pixel resolution • Water resistant to 5 ATM • Bluetooth 5.2 • 43x36x9.9mm (HxWxD) • 26g (without strap) • Two-year warranty www.snipca.com/53117

VERDICT Huawei's fitness tracker looks like an Apple Watch, but has fewer functions at a lower price

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE
Fitbit Charge 6 £140 Our favourite Fitbit is slightly more expensive but it's ideal if you prefer something less flashy

SMART TV | **£139** from Currys www.snipca.com/53157

Toshiba 32LF2F53DB

Nothing to see here

There's arguably never been a better time to buy a 32in smart TV for, say, a bedroom or kitchen, with prices widely tumbling well below £150. This £139 model from Toshiba has a Full HD 1080p LED screen that runs on Amazon's Fire TV operating system.

This software is probably the best thing about it. Rather than developing its own, Toshiba has licenced Amazon's interface and, while this means it's a bit pushy about Prime Video content, you can also get all the other streaming and catch-up services, from Netflix to BBC iPlayer. The remote control is straightforward and the interface is easy to navigate.

> "Its interface is easy to navigate, but its screen is lacklustre and audio is tinny"

The screen, sadly, is less impressive. We weren't expecting stunning quality from a basic LED panel at this price, but we were still a tad underwhelmed. Night-time scenes in particular lacked definition and sharpness.

To make matters worse, it managed a peak brightness of just 228cd/m² in our tests, which might mean it's difficult to make anything out if you have sunlight streaming in through a nearby window. It managed 79.9 per cent of colours in the DCI-P3 colour standard, though, which isn't at all bad. That said, when watching films that rely on dazzling spectacle the imagery was fairly lacklustre. Moreover, high-octane, fast-moving scenes in action movies appeared juddery.

We rarely expect miracles from the speakers in small TVs, but there's a pronounced lack of bass here. Even when viewing loud action scenes, the speakers' narrow soundstage left the soundtrack sounding restricted and thin, with underwhelming low frequencies and distorted highs. You could fix this with an affordable sound bar, but it doesn't gloss over the fact that the built-in sound is tinny.

The design is decent. It's a fairly slim, lightweight set that will seamlessly slot into more compact spaces. Connections include a headphone socket, USB, digital optical port, and two HDMI sockets.

Frankly, if you want a 32in TV with Amazon's software, you're better off opting for Amazon's own Fire TV (£180 from www.snipca.com/49979, reviewed in Issue 682). If your budget stretches a little further, you should consider the LG 32LQ6300 instead (£199 from www.snipca.com/53161) because it's an even better TV for the price.

SPECIFICATIONS

32in Full HD 1920x1080-pixel resolution • 60Hz refresh rate • 2x 8W speakers • 2x HDMI ports • 473x728x193mm (HxWxD, including stand) • 4.2kg • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/53157

VERDICT A budget 32in smart TV with an easy-to-use Amazon interface, but the picture and sound are disappointing – even for this price

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE LG 32LQ6300 £199

For a better-quality picture and superior audio, this older 32in model offers great value for money

DO I REALLY NEED...

A tablet with two USB-C ports?

What is it?

Chinese manufacturer Teclast has launched an 11in Android tablet (pictured) with two USB-C ports for just £121.

What does it do?

Two USB-C ports means it's easier to use it as a second screen for a monitor, while keeping it charged at the same time. Alternatively, you could connect it to a monitor, mouse and keyboard, and use Teclast's PC Mode software to impose a Windows-like interface on to Android and use the tablet as a PC.

What's the catch?

Teclast is relatively unknown in the UK. It uses an Allwinner A733 processor, which is also fairly obscure. It's currently only available from Chinese-based sites Temu (www.snipca.com/53163) and AliExpress (www.snipca.com/53164).

So can I do without it?

Yes. Buying from Temu or AliExpress can be a risk. Still, we'd love to see other tablet manufacturers add more USB ports.

NEXT ISSUE

On Sale Weds 15 Jan

Dell Latitude 7455 Copilot+ laptop with Qualcomm's Snapdragon X Elite processor

OnePlus Pad 2 An affordable Android tablet with an excellent battery life

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Buy It

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Our pick of products that have won the Buy It award

LAPTOP

Dell Inspiron 14 Plus
£799 from www.snipca.com/51831
Tested Issue 683

This laptop has the same processor (Intel Core Ultra 7 155H) as our previous favourite (Acer Swift Go 4), but manages to squeeze more speed out of it. It also comes with 16GB RAM, 512GB SSD and a 14in 2240x1400-pixel screen. Excellent value overall.

ALTERNATIVE Acer Swift Go 14 Still a fast and powerful laptop, with a great 14in screen. £1,099 from www.snipca.com/49733

DESKTOP PC

Palicomp AMD Cobra
£400 from www.snipca.com/43515
Tested Issue 643

This fast PC is a mouth-watering bargain, with 16GB of RAM, a 2TB SSD and a six-core processor – though it lacks USB-C ports and built-in Wi-Fi.

ALTERNATIVE Wired2Fire Ultima WS Home Office Workstation Blisteringly fast PC, powered by an overclocked eight-core processor and 1TB SSD. £656 from www.snipca.com/41500

APPLE iPAD

Apple iPad 10.9in
£329 from www.snipca.com/51839
Tested Issue 646

The price of the 10th-generation iPad, released in 2022, has fallen far enough to make it better value than earlier models. If the Amazon price above has expired, get it for £349 on Apple's site.

ALTERNATIVE iPad mini 7 The 2024 version of the mini improves the colour accuracy on the 8.3in screen and has a more powerful processor. £499 from www.snipca.com/52573

ANDROID TABLET

NEW ENTRY

Honor MagicPad2
£500 from www.snipca.com/50039
Tested Issue 700

With a larger screen (12.3in) than the Galaxy Tab S9 (below) and a similar performance for less money, Honor's MagicPad2 is a superb new tablet. The OLED screen has a strikingly sharp resolution, and yet battery life is a mighty 18 hours.

ALTERNATIVE Samsung Galaxy Tab S9 Has a much brighter screen than its predecessor, making it ideal for watching TV. Also has a faster processor, speeding up tasks. £799 (128GB) from www.snipca.com/50039

APPLE iPHONE

Apple iPhone 16
£799 from www.snipca.com/52317
Tested Issue 695

This is the best new iPhone for years, boosted by a processor that's as fast as more expensive models. The screen is excellent, while the new Camera Control button gives lots of ways to take photos.

ALTERNATIVE iPhone 14 Now discounted to £599 (128GB), this remains a speedy phone with great features and an impressive camera. £599 from www.snipca.com/52411

ANDROID PHONE

PRICE DROP

Google Pixel 7a
£310 from www.snipca.com/46332
Tested Issue 660

A cheaper version of Google's flagship phone, this uses AI to add clarity to photos, and lasts an impressive 10 hours. Has a fast processor and 8GB RAM to supercharge performance.

ALTERNATIVE Nothing Phone 2a Don't be put off by the odd name. This has a distinctive design, superb camera and decent battery life. From a UK company too. £319 from www.snipca.com/49930

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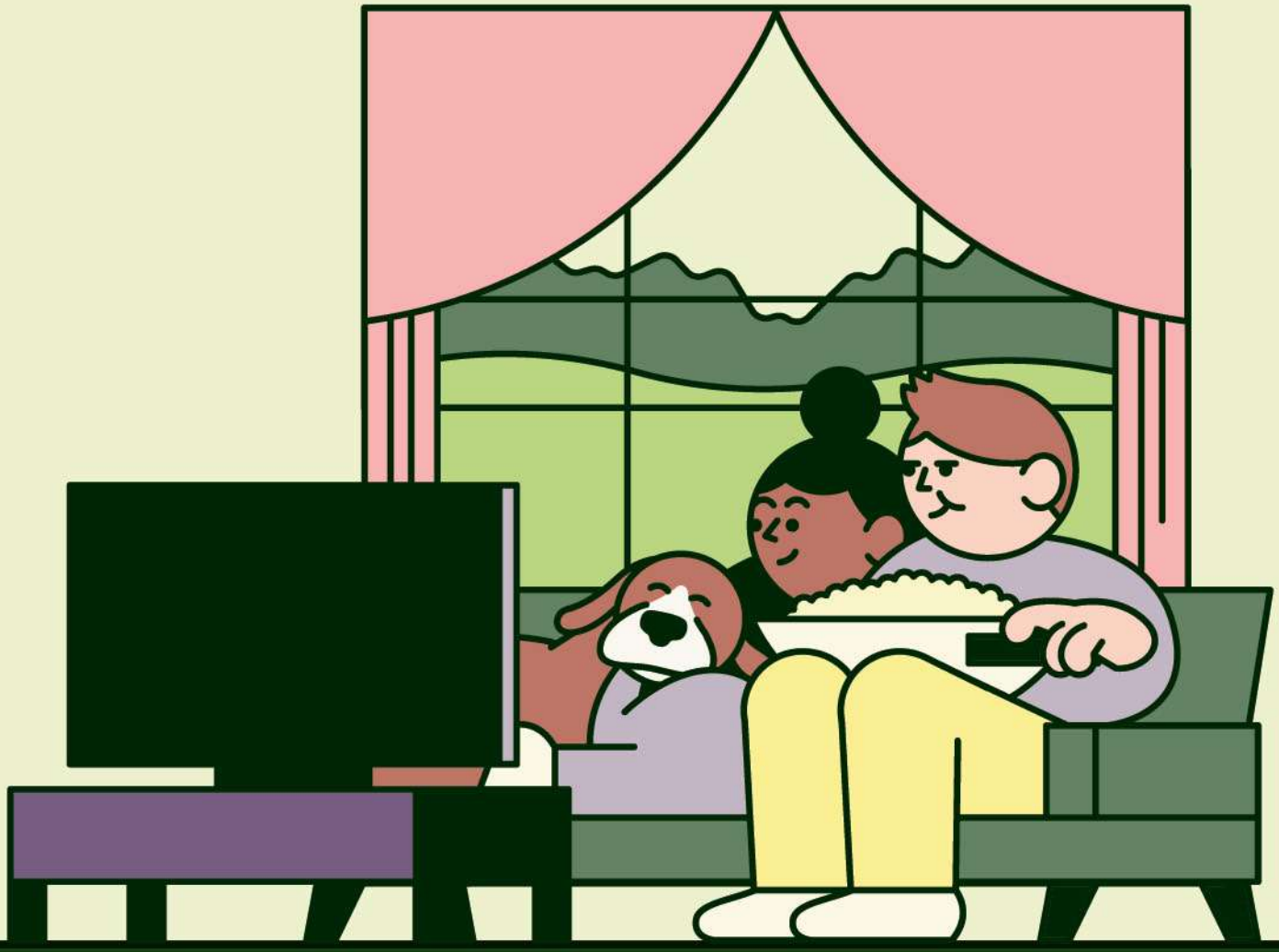

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Buy It

Our pick of products that have won the **Buy It** award

MINI PC

PRICE DROP

Geekom A8
£649 from www.snipca.com/51157
Tested Issue 689

This tiny machine (37x112x112mm) doesn't have much room for ports, but makes up for it with a 2TB SSD, a fast processor and an SD card slot for adding storage. It comes with 32GB RAM, as does a slightly slower model that's typically around £250 cheaper and has only a 1TB SSD. Take your pick.

ALTERNATIVE GMKtec NucBox M7 Pro Has an older processor, but comes with plenty of ports and room to add a graphics card. £440 from www.snipca.com/52858

EBOOK READER

Amazon Kindle Paperwhite
£160 from www.snipca.com/52730
Tested Issue 698

The sixth version of the Paperwhite has a larger screen (7in), faster page turns and longer battery life (12 weeks – up from 10). Its glare-free finish mean you can easily read it in bright sunlight, and its 300ppi resolution makes text a joy to read.

ALTERNATIVE Kobo Libra Kobo's first colour e-reader, with over 4,000 tones to make illustrations and photos leap out. £199 from www.snipca.com/50192

SECURITY SOFTWARE

Norton 360 Premium
£19.99 from www.snipca.com/33247
Tested Issue 629

Norton has always performed strongly in our antivirus tests, regularly making the top three. Owned by US firm NortonLifeLock, it's available at a discount on our Software Store. Use the link above for a 10-device, two-year licence. Other versions are available, including Norton 360 for Gamers.

ALTERNATIVE Bitdefender Total Security Another top performer that we're offering at a discount. £19.99 from www.snipca.com/41141

WEBCAM

Logitech C925e Business Webcam
£53 from www.snipca.com/50751
Tested Issue 608

Despite the name, this webcam is also great for home users. Its standout feature is automatically adjusting itself to keep your picture looking sharp. It offers a 78-degree field of view, which is fine for everyday video chats with one person in front of the camera.

ALTERNATIVE Creative Live Cam Sync 4K Affordable 4K webcam with high-quality video that can also capture voice from a distance. £38 from www.snipca.com/51577

PC MONITOR

PRICE DROP

Philips 27E1N1600AE
£200 from www.snipca.com/51687
Tested Issue 692

An affordable 27in monitor with a sharp resolution, impressive image quality and a sturdy build. It has an HDMI port, a USB-C port and two USB 3.0. The hefty base means you can raise and tilt the monitor easily using just one hand.

ALTERNATIVE Asus ROG Strix XG27ACS Another excellent 27in monitor with 1440p resolution and a fast refresh rate aimed at gamers. £249 from www.snipca.com/49898

SOLID-STATE DRIVE

Corsair MP600 Pro LPX 1TB
£89 from www.snipca.com/52658
Tested Issue 630

In our tests, this M.2 SSD hit speeds of 7,364MB/s and 6,870MB/s when reading and writing data – astonishingly fast scores. It's compatible with the new PCIe 4.0 standard, which is twice as fast as PCIe 3.0. The 1TB model costs £89; 2TB costs £180.

ALTERNATIVE Crucial MX500 500GB As fast as an SSD can get in the traditional 2.5in SATA format, this is a great-value upgrade. £70 from www.snipca.com/37304

COMPETITION

Win 1 of 5...

Cherry Stream Desktop Comfort keyboards and mice

Cherry's new Stream Desktop Comfort is an ergonomically designed keyboard and mouse set that connects to your PC wirelessly through its own nano-USB dongle using a 2.4GHz signal.

The right-handed mouse with rubberised thumb rest encourages a natural hand position and is almost silent in operation. The flat keyboard lets you type comfortably and with precision, and it's also very quiet thanks to Cherry's SX scissor mechanism. This delivers the company's familiar unbeatable typing experience as well as precise and, above all, near-silent keystrokes.

The right-handed mouse has just as much to offer as the keyboard. Its quiet buttons feel satisfyingly responsive, and its four-stage adjustable sensor works at up to 4000dpi for precise control of the mouse pointer, making you even more productive. The ergonomic keyboard and mouse are perfect partners.

To enter this competition, answer the question at www.snipca.com/53152 and submit your details by midnight Tuesday 14 January. Good luck!

You can buy **Cherry's Stream Desktop Comfort keyboard** and mouse set for £79.99 from Amazon (www.snipca.com/53153). For more information on Cherry products visit www.cherry.co.uk and www.facebook.com/ORG.CHERRY.

PRINTER

Epson EcoTank ET-2830
£250 from www.snipca.com/51715
Tested Issue 676

This has recently risen in price from £180, but it's still better value than the ET-1810 because it adds copying and scanning to its functions for £79 more. Print quality is great, especially for photos, which have crisp details, vivid colours and realistic skin tones.

ALTERNATIVE Epson EcoTank ET-1810
Not the fastest printer, but comes with enough ink for 4,500 mono and 7,500 colour pages. £160 from www.snipca.com/52191

SMART TV

PRICE DROP

Amazon Fire TV 50in Omni QLED
£409 from www.snipca.com/52542
Tested Issue 694

A fantastic 50in QLED screen with 4K resolution that produces vibrant tones in bright, sunlit images and pale, subtle shades in more atmospheric scenes. It provides access to all the streaming services you need, and offers voice control through Alexa.

ALTERNATIVE Samsung Q60B
Excellent colour reproduction in well-lit scenes and the picture is wonderfully sharp, especially in 4K. £490 from www.snipca.com/51020

ROUTER

PRICE DROP

Asus RT-AXE7800
£230 from www.snipca.com/52957
Tested Issue 665

This router has Wi-Fi 6E, so will be capable of the fastest possible speeds on the 6GHz network over the next few years. It has five Ethernet ports and also a USB 3.0 port to connect a hard drive or NAS drive.

ALTERNATIVE Synology WRX560
Our previous favourite remains an excellent choice, delivering speeds of up to 791.5Mbps. Add more units to set up mesh Wi-Fi. £211 from www.snipca.com/52051

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HOW TO...

Declutter your Windows desktop for 2025

by Nik Rawlinson

What you need: Windows 10 or 11; DesktopOK **Time required:** One hour

You've probably heard the phrase, 'tidy desk, tidy mind'. Nobody seems to know quite where it came from (we've searched), but the philosophy is easy to understand: if you're not working amid piles of clutter, you can probably think more clearly and – as a result – be more productive.

This is just as true in the digital realm as it is in the physical world. The trouble is, Windows' desktop is too convenient a place to save files you're going to need in the near future. Why bury them several folders deep?

Well, for one thing, because your desktop can quickly get cluttered, which makes finding those files tricky. Secondly, Microsoft has gone to great lengths to give us more efficient alternatives to using the desktop as a dumping ground. Windows 10 and 11 have excellent built-in search tools, which go beyond indexing files on the basis of name alone and can pull up a list of results from within the contents of a file.

Saving files to your desktop can also slow your computer. That's because the desktop is essentially a folder, like your Documents, Pictures and Videos directories. However, while these folders are only ever displayed when you open them, the desktop folder – being spread out across your PC – needs to be displayed and updated the whole time any part of it is in view. Granted, the effect will be minimal on a powerful computer with an SSD, but if you have an old PC with a fairly slow hard drive and a crammed desktop, it can really start to suffer.

So, with the new year upon us, what better time could there be to knock your desktop into shape? Windows has several built-in clean-up tools that can help, while any gaps can be plugged using free software.

Start by creating a backup of your system so that if you delete something you later discover you need, you can easily recover it. If you're only going to clean up your desktop, the simplest option is to plug in an external drive and drag across a copy of the desktop contents. However, as part of our clean-up, we're also going to look at where we're wasting space with files we probably no longer need.

If you're going to follow those steps, perform a full backup using a tool like IDrive (www.idrive.com). Although its software is closely associated with its own online backup service, you can also use it to make local backups for free.

1 Remove unwanted files from Windows

Press Windows key+I to open Settings, then click System, followed by Storage. Windows will do an audit of your current drive use and present its findings. Cast an eye over this screen and get rid of any clutter you no longer need.

In our case, we have 96.4GB of temporary files on our drive, and 111GB of 'other' data. Click 'Temporary files' to see what this category comprises. This includes 47.2GB in our Downloads folder (1 in our screenshot), almost half that much in the recycle bin 2, and 26.7GB of previous Windows installations 3. Those are huge figures, much bigger than the sections Windows has automatically selected for deletion (pre-ticked boxes).

Our storage scan showed we have 47.2GB in our Downloads folder, 26.7GB of Windows installations and 22.7GB in our recycle bin

Although we're fairly sure we could get rid of our downloads, we'll leave them where they are for the moment, but click the boxes next to everything else. We'll also untick the Thumbnails box so previews of our pictures and videos don't need to be recreated. We'll then click the 'Remove files' button at the top of the list to delete the associated data. Before doing the same yourself, make absolutely certain you're not going to lose anything you need, because the files really are removed for good – not just moved to temporary storage the way they are when you send them to the bin.

How I keep things tidy

I have to confess that my desktop (both physical and on my computer) is usually a terrible mess. However, having worked through my files while writing this How To feature, things are pretty well organised at the moment. With the help of DesktopOK I'm hoping it'll stay that way for a while. I'm not going to make it a New Year's resolution, as I'm hopeless at keeping those, but it is something I'll try and be more mindful about in the months ahead.

Nik Rawlinson

How do you keep your PC desktop tidy?
Please let us know: letters@computeractive.co.uk

2 Turn on Storage Sense

Now that you've taken the first step, tell Windows to keep an eye on things. Click back to the Storage section, then click Storage Sense. This is a feature that Microsoft introduced with Windows 10 and it automatically runs – assuming you've enabled it – whenever drive space starts to get low.

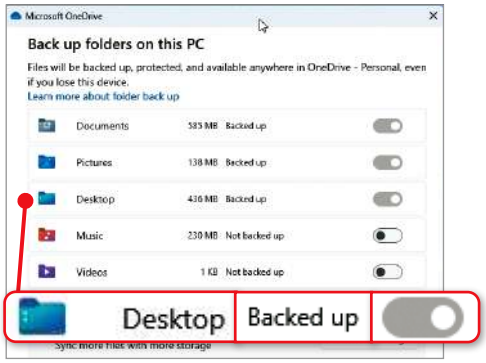
At its most basic, on both Windows 10 and 11, it will automatically delete temporary files and the contents of your recycle bin. However, on Windows 11 it can also go one step further and delete local copies of files you've synchronised to OneDrive, on the basis that you can recover them from the cloud the next time they're required. It isn't designed specifically to help keep your desktop in order, but you can use it to reduce the size of the desktop folder with a little bit of tweaking.

In Windows 11, turn on Storage Sense by clicking the slider below 'Automatic User content cleanup' so it slides to the right ('On') and turns blue (see screenshot below). Now scroll to the bottom of the panel and, below your name, you should see an option for 'Content will become online-only if not opened for more than'. If you've not made any changes, this option will be set to '30 days (default)'.

What this means is that if you've not touched a file that's synchronised to your OneDrive account for at least that time period, it deletes the local copy, but keeps a marker for it so that if you try to open it again, it can retrieve it for you, and you'll be none the wiser. You can change the interval to as little as '1 day' or as much as '60 days' by selecting from the menu.

If you don't see this option at all, it's because your computer isn't logged into OneDrive. Change this by clicking the OneDrive icon on the Windows taskbar, or by launching OneDrive from the Start menu.

You now need to check that your desktop files are included in the selection of items that you're syncing to OneDrive. Click the OneDrive icon again, then the top-right cog in the box that appears, followed by Settings. Click 'Sync and backup' in the sidebar, then the 'Manage backup' button in the main section of the window. Here, you'll find five folders you can back up to the cloud alongside the local OneDrive folder that's automatically synchronised.


Microsoft OneDrive
Back up folders on this PC
Files will be backed up, protected, and available anywhere in OneDrive - Personal, even if you lose this device.
Learn more about folder back up
Documents 585 MB Backed up
Pictures 138 MB Backed up
Desktop 436 MB Backed up
Music 230 MB Not backed up
Videos 1 KB Not backed up
Desktop
Backed up

Make sure the Desktop slider is turned on (grey), so it shows 'Backed up'

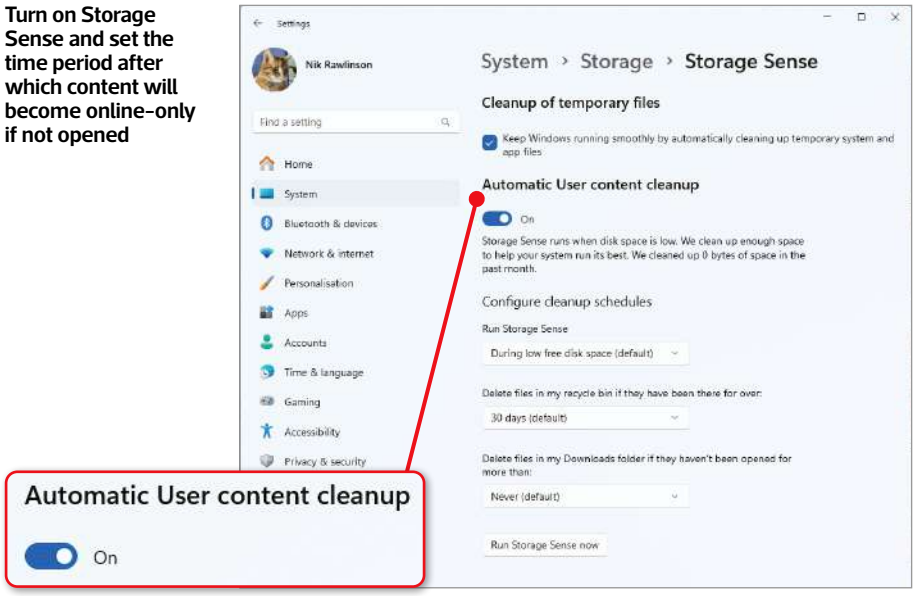
Make sure the Desktop slider is turned on (grey), so it shows 'Backed up' (see screenshot above). Now, when space starts running low, the contents of your messy desktop will be removed from your machine.

3 Drag your largest files to correct folders

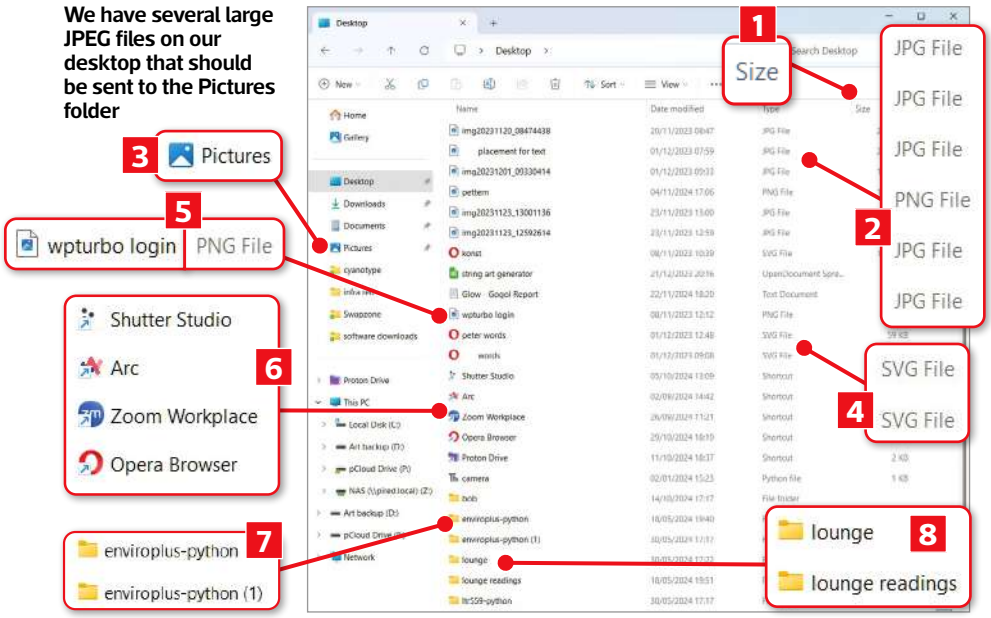
However, as we mentioned earlier, when Storage Sense removes a local file from your machine, it leaves a placeholder behind so you can open it as easily as you would if it was still stored on your drive. In the case of a messy desktop, therefore, Storage Sense isn't going to help you tidy things up, even if it does reduce the amount of data on your drive.

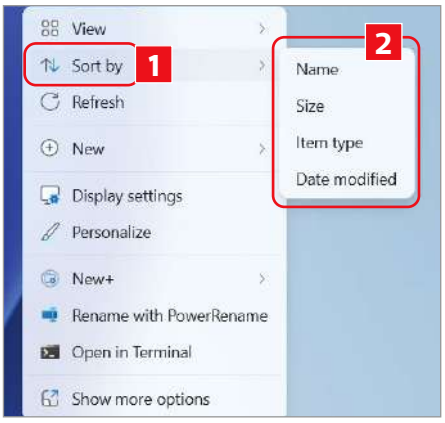
So, your next job is either to sort things

Turn on Storage Sense and set the time period after which content will become online-only if not opened


Settings
Nik Rawlinson
System › Storage › Storage Sense
Cleanup of temporary files
Keep Windows running smoothly by automatically cleaning up temporary system and app files
Automatic User content cleanup
On
Storage Sense runs when disk space is low. We clean up enough space to help your system run its best. We cleaned up 0 bytes of space in the past month.
Configure cleanup schedules
Run Storage Sense
During low free disk space (default)
Delete files in my recycle bin if they have been there for over:
30 days (default)
Delete files in my Downloads folder if they haven't been opened for more than:
Never (default)
Run Storage Sense now
Home
System
Bluetooth & devices
Network & internet
Personalisation
Apps
Accounts
Time & language
Gaming
Accessibility
Privacy & security
Automatic User content cleanup
On

We have several large JPEG files on our desktop that should be sent to the Pictures folder





Right-click your desktop then click 'Sort by' and choose an option

out within Windows or use third-party software. We'd recommend starting with the Windows option, but rather than dragging things around the desktop, open File Explorer and click Desktop on the left. That way, you can use File Explorer's various views and sorting options to help you complete the job more quickly.

Start by clicking the header of the Size column (1 in our screenshot above) to move your biggest files to the top of the list. This will help you more quickly identify your worst space hogs. As you can see from our screenshot, five of the the six largest files on our desktop are JPEGs 2. After checking, we want to keep them, so we'll drag them straight into the Pictures folder 3. The same goes for the large SVG files 4, which are vector images.

You've probably spotted another image on that list, with a .PNG extension 5. However, as you can see from the file name, this is a screenshot we've taken with our login details for a website. Rather than move it to our Pictures folder, we'll do what we should have done a long time ago: add the login details to our password manager Bitwarden (www.bitwarden.com) and delete the file entirely. Leaving screenshots like that lying around is very risky.

Below these, there are five shortcuts. Four of these – for Shutter Studio, Arc, Zoom Workplace and Opera Browser 6 – are for programs, which we can find just as easily on the Start menu, so they can be deleted immediately. The other, for Proton Drive, is replicated in the sidebar, so that can go too. Things are looking better already.

Where it starts to get complicated, though, is when you get down to the folders. Some of these, like the two enviroplus-python folders 7, contain code, whereas the two folders with 'lounge' in their name 8 contain data. There's no uniform way to handle these, so you'll need to make your own decision with anything similar on your machine, but our recommendation would be to make directories within your Documents folder for groups like 'data', 'code' and so on, then organise each of these as a subfolder in the appropriate location.

Continue working your way through the items on your desktop until you've removed as many as you can and filed everything else in a logical place. This will make the next step much easier.

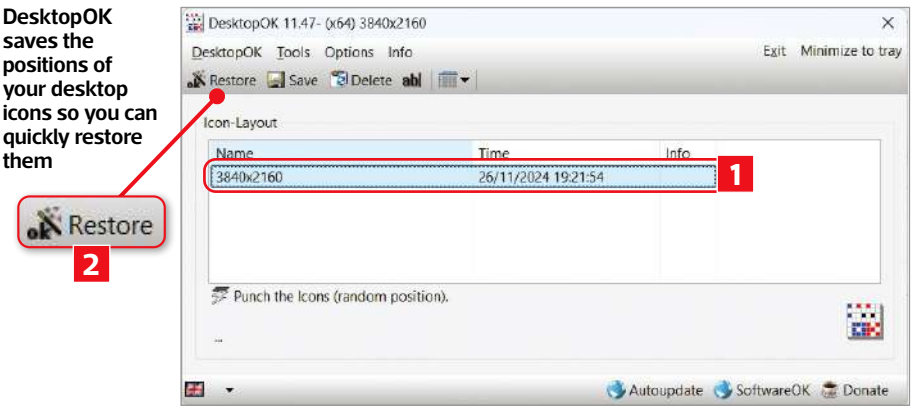
4 Sort your desktop files and stop them moving

Close File Explorer and minimise any windows that are obscuring the desktop. Now drag the remaining icons to the positions where you'd like them to live. If you just want them arranged along the left-hand border, right-click an empty area on the desktop, then hover over 'Sort by' (1 in our screenshot above) and select an option from the menu 2.

Over time, all your good work could be undone as things get moved around again. You can save yourself repeating what you've just done using the excellent free program DesktopOK. Visit www.snipca.com/53027 then click the Download link below the small screenshot. Now click 'DesktopOK_Installer_x64.zip' to download the software. When it's finished, click the file then 'Extract all' on the toolbar and save the files in a folder of your choice.

Next, go to that folder and launch the 'desktopOK_Installer_x64.exe' file. When it's finished installing, launch DesktopOK from the Start menu, and immediately click Save. This creates a new entry (1 in our screenshot below) in the table in the centre of the program window, which records the positions of the icons on your desktop. To check it's worked, move a few icons somewhere else, then select the entry in the table again, followed by the Restore button on the toolbar 2. Your misaligned icons will jump back to their original positions.

DesktopOK saves the positions of your desktop icons so you can quickly restore them

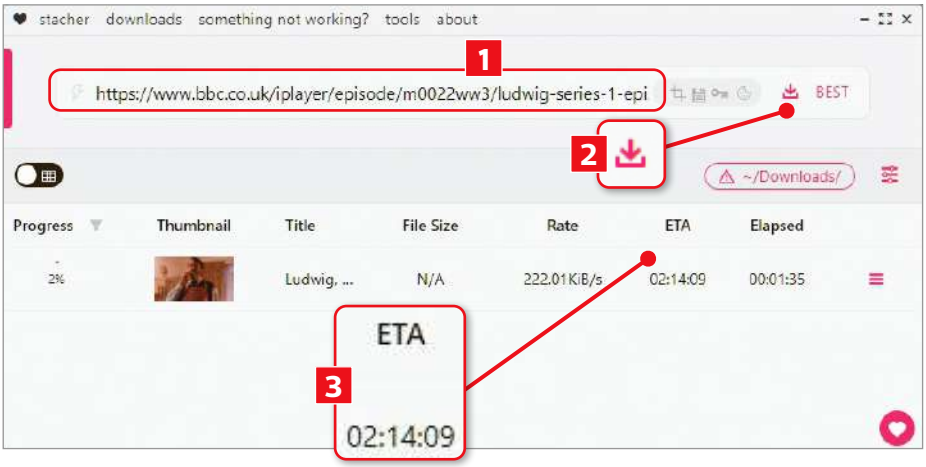


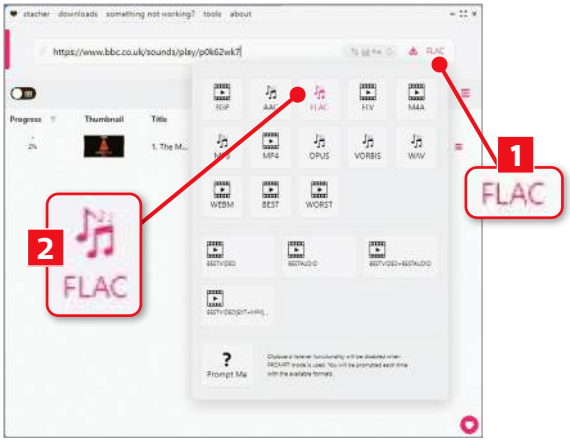
Download YouTube and BBC videos from the web

What you need: Stacher **Time required:** 30 minutes plus download time

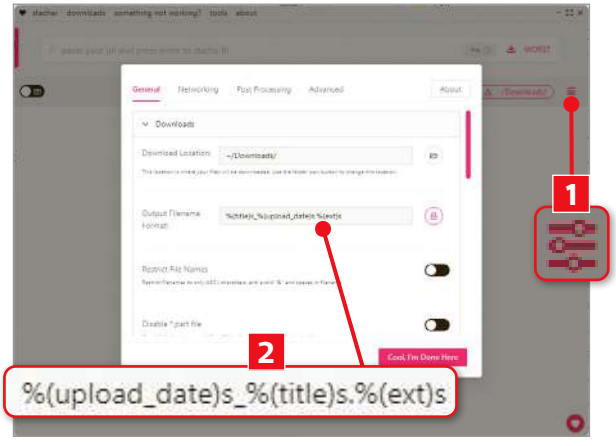
Video publishers on sites such as YouTube would rather you stream videos than download them. That's understandable: we live in a world of fast, always-on connections, and streaming means you're always watching the most up-to-date version of a video. But this reliance on streaming isn't much use if you're away from a network connection for a long period of time, such as while on a holiday or a cruise, for example. Thankfully, there are still third-party tools, including Stacher (https://stacher.io), that let you download from a wide variety of popular video services, including Vimeo, TikTok, YouTube and BBC iPlayer. It can even keep an eye on recent uploads for you, so you won't have to keep checking for new videos manually.

STEP 1 Start by visiting a website that hosts a video you want to download. Find the video and copy its URL from your browser's address bar. Switch to Stacher and paste the URL you just copied into its address box 1, then click the download button 2. It will add the video to a list of files to download, which you can also use to monitor its progress. How long this takes will depend on your broadband connection speed and the size of the video file, but Stacher provides an estimated time of arrival (ETA) figure 3 to give you some idea of how long you need to wait.

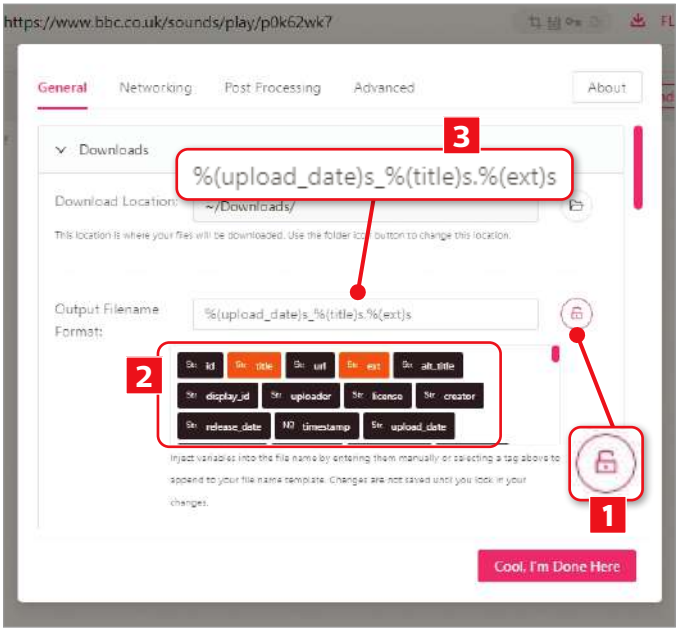


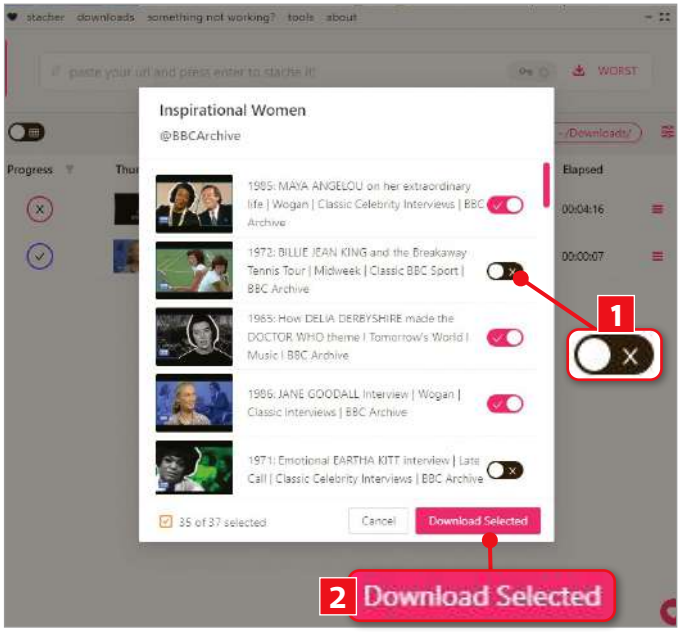


STEP 2 You can also use Stacher to download audio, such as radio programmes and podcasts. When doing this, it's best to switch to an audio format for your download because it saves space. Find the address of the page that hosts the audio file you want, as you did for the video in Step 1, and paste it into Stacher. Now click the word at the end of the bar 1 (this is FLAC in the screenshot above, but BEST in Step 1). We chose the FLAC audio format from the dropdown menu 2, but there's a range of audio and video options.



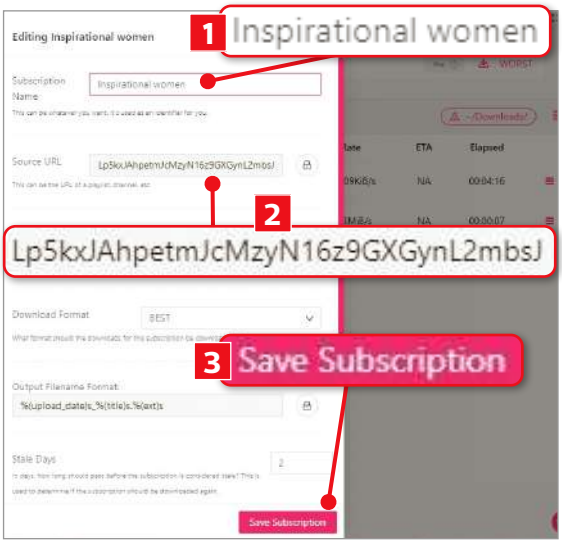
STEP 3 When Stacher saves a file to disk, it uses the publisher's original upload date as the first part of the file name. This might make sense if you're downloading several episodes of a series, but it's often more useful to put the name of the TV show first. To change the naming format, click the settings button 1, then edit the Output Filename Format 2. To swap the order of elements in the default format, for example, type %(title)s_%(upload_date)s.%(ext)s.

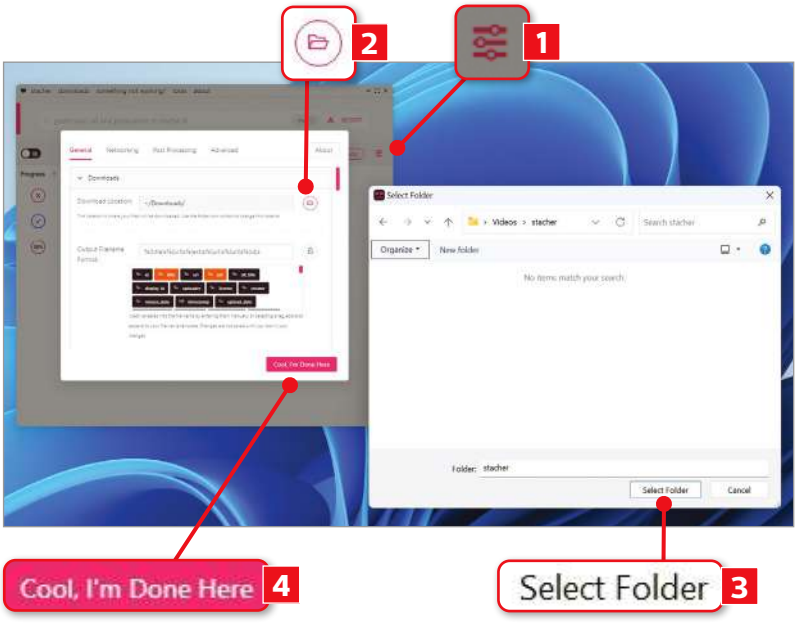




STEP 4 You can change more details in the download's file name. Click the padlock 1 to open a long list of options shown as buttons, including episode ID, series, and more 2. To add an element to the file name, click it, and Stacher will add it to the end. If you want to add more elements than we described in Step 3, click in the box 3, press Ctrl+A to select everything inside, then press the backspace key to delete it. Next, click the element buttons in the order you want them to appear in the filename.

STEP 5 If you're using Stacher to download from YouTube, you can save all the videos from a playlist by copying its address and pasting it into Stacher. The program will list each video in the playlist, including its name and a thumbnail, and place a switch next to each. Turn off the switch beside any video you don't want to download 1. When you've done that, click Download Selected 2 and Stacher will retrieve all the videos you've chosen and save them to your Downloads folder.





STEP 6 If a YouTube publisher frequently updates their playlists, it's easy to miss the latest videos. Stacher's subscriptions tool can keep an eye on a page or playlist to check for new videos, and download them automatically when they appear. Again, copy the address of the page or playlist from your browser's address bar, then press Ctrl+N in Stacher to create a new subscription. Give it a name 1 and paste in the address 2, then click Save Subscription 3. Stacher will now monitor the list on your behalf.

STEP 7 By default, Stacher saves everything to your Downloads folder. However, you can change this to any location you like. If you'd rather store videos in your Videos library, for example, click the Settings button 1, then the folder icon 2 beside the Download Location box. Navigate to the Videos library (it usually appears in File Explorer's sidebar unless you've removed it), then click Select Folder 3, followed by 'Cool, I'm Done Here' 4.

Readers' Tips

TIP OF THE FORTNIGHT

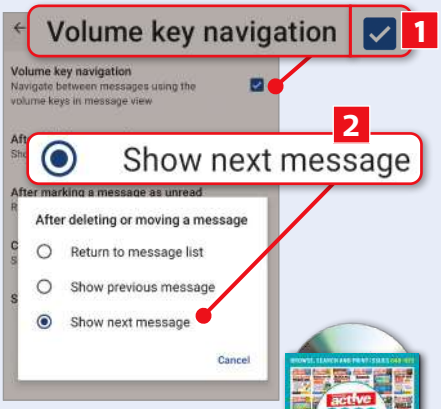
Scroll through Thunderbird using volume buttons

I installed the Thunderbird app on my Android phone as soon as I read about it in Issue 696 (page 44), and linked it to my Gmail email account. I was curious to see how Thunderbird would work on a phone compared with a PC – would it incorporate any of the phone's controls, for example? The answer is yes. It offers a clever way of scrolling through messages using your phone's volume buttons.

Install the app from the Google Play Store (www.snipca.com/52416) then once you've linked your accounts, tap the three horizontal lines at the top left. Next tap the settings cog at the bottom left, then 'General settings' at the top. Now tap 'Interaction' and tick 'Volume key navigation' (1 in our screenshot).

Now when you open an email, you can press the volume controls to move to the next or previous message. I've also activated a setting that shows the next email automatically after I've deleted or moved one 2.

Sam Barlow



Sam wins a copy of our 2023 Back Issue CD

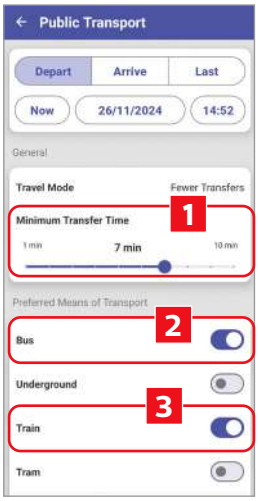
Buy it from us at www.snipca.com/48860

MAPS

Set minimum transfer times on public transport

I liked Kevin Wiffen's tip on setting traffic-delay times in Magic Earth (Issue 698). I've been using it as a replacement for Google Maps on my phone since you recommended doing so in Issue 696 (page 62). I have a couple of tips for new users like me, particularly those who rely on public transport.

First install it on your device from www.magicearth.com. Now tap the icon in the top-right, which looks like an arrow pointing right, then select a transport type from the dropdown menu at the top. Choosing 'Public Transport' selects bus and train services. Now type your current position and where you're going. Select your destination from the suggestions that appear, then tap Route at the top right. Your journey will appear on the map.



So far, so good. What I do next is tap the bottom-right cog and move the slider to set a minimum transfer time (1 in our screenshot left). This is important for me because I'm not very mobile and need a little longer than some to cross platforms or find the correct stop at bus stations. It means I can tailor my route to better suit my needs. I also turn on the sliders for bus 2 and train 3 below and disable the others.

Ken Midgeley

PHONES

Filter eSIM deals by GBs and price

I wasn't surprised when you named Airhub (www.airhubapp.com) as the best overall provider of eSIM deals (Issue 697, page 63). I've been using the company for the past few years when travelling in Europe, and it's good value.

Choosing the best package for your needs can be daunting, however. I advise

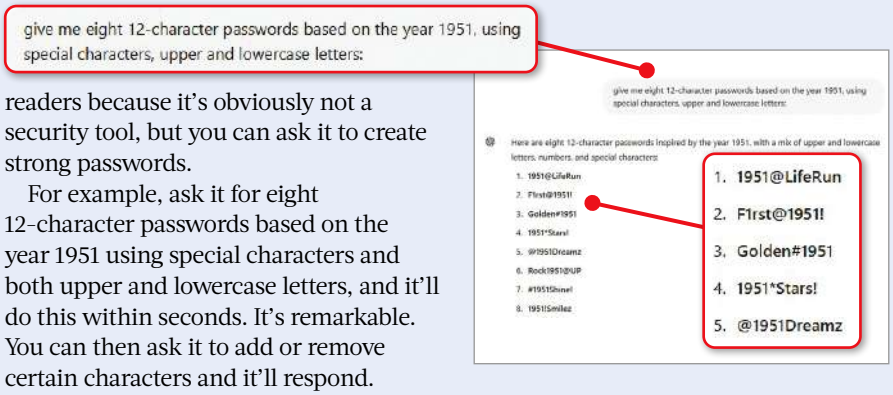
Why I stopped using...

Kaspersky Password Manager

I thought I'd uninstalled all my Kaspersky software following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, but I forgot about this app on my Android phone. The last thing I'd want to do these days is trust Kaspersky with my passwords.

And what I use instead...

I now use a combination of **Bitwarden's password manager** (https://bitwarden.com) and **ChatGPT** (https://chatgpt.com). The latter might surprise some readers because it's obviously not a security tool, but you can ask it to create strong passwords.

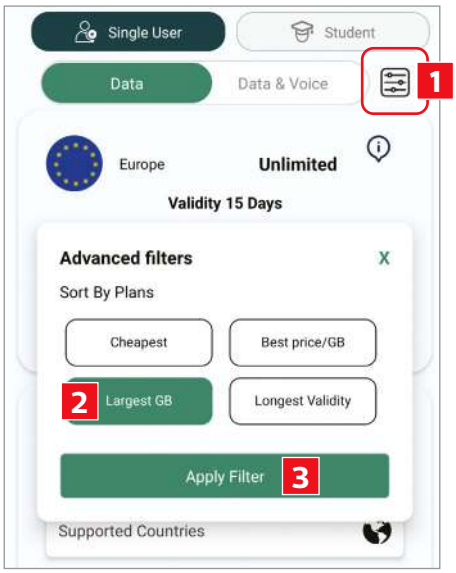

give me eight 12-character passwords based on the year 1951, using special characters, upper and lowercase letters:
1. 1951@LifeRun
2. F1rst@1951!
3. Golden#1951
4. 1951*Stars!
5. @1951Dreamz

For example, ask it for eight 12-character passwords based on the year 1951 using special characters and both upper and lowercase letters, and it'll do this within seconds. It's remarkable. You can then ask it to add or remove certain characters and it'll respond.

It can also give you ideas for a password strategy you can apply across the web. I asked it for a password policy that incorporated the name of the site I was signing into and it came up with 10 ideas, none of which I'd thought of before.

Gareth Evans

Tell us why you stopped using a website, app or program: letters@computeractive.co.uk



new users to install the app then tap the filter icon (1 in our screenshot above). You can then choose which types of deal to prioritise (I always choose 'Largest GB' 2), then tap Apply Filter 3. This displays the deals in the order you want.

Sean Dickinson

Reader recommends...

RCA Roku TV smart TV

£125 from Amazon www.snipca.com/50707

Having downsized to a bungalow on the Suffolk coast with my wife, I needed a cheap TV for our small study, where I retreat to watch Amazon Prime Video while she watches BBC and ITV programmes in the lounge.

I read *Computeractive*'s review of the RCA Roku TV (Issue 686, page 29) and it sounded like what I wanted. At 24 inches the screen is the perfect size for a small room, and I was already familiar with the Roku interface and remote control, having previously owned a Roku Express. The price was right too – just £125.

The TV was easy to hang on the wall using the VESA mount, and the audio quality is fine as long as you don't turn the volume up too high. Adding the Prime Video app was easy. There are also apps for other streaming services such as Disney+ and Netflix, but I don't subscribe to those. Overall it's a great budget TV for use as a second screen in a room that isn't your main entertainment centre.

Arthur Jones

Want to recommend hardware or software to fellow readers?
Email letters@computeractive.co.uk

HARDWARE

Add a recessed power strip to your desk

I have only one power socket next to my computer desk, so I needed a way to add more. I bought a recessed power strip (£28.95 from www.snipca.com/53019, pictured below 1) and fitted it to my desk. This gives me three power sockets, three USB charging ports and a USB-C port.

I used cardboard from the box it came in to cut out a template that was the same shape and size as the strip. I taped this to the desk and marked it with a pen. I then drilled four holes in the corners, just inside the recess, then used a jigsaw to cut the hole. Finally, I attached the strip to my desk using the supplied screws 2.

Tony Martin

SECURITY

Report scams using sign language

I have been deaf since my thirties, so I was pleased to discover that I can now use sign language to report scams through Action Fraud. You can find out how to do this at www.snipca.com/53013, but in short, you have to download the SignVideo app (www.snipca.com/53014), then scroll down the SignDirectory and look for the 'Action Fraud' listing. Click the button and a SignVideo interpreter will appear on your screen to interpret your conversation.

Roger Bentley

SOFTWARE

Update your programs using Glary Utilities

Regarding Issue 697's Cover Feature ('Never miss another software update'), for many years I've been using the free version of Glary Utilities (www.snipca.com/53010) to keep my software up to date. This uses the FilePuma Update Detector to get the updates, which you also recommend in your feature. It usually notifies you when updates are available. Simply click on the update icon to perform the update.

Glary Utilities has many other functions, including a duplicate-file finder and a tool for fixing broken shortcuts. One of the features I use most often is the Temporary Files Cleaner, which finds temporary files that are not in use. You can then choose which to delete.

Tony Huby

TV

Format DVD-Rs to play recorded TV

Regarding DE Killingley's question in Issue 695's Problems Solved ('Can I rescue my TV recordings?', page 69), in the past I had a Panasonic EX-77 DVD recorder. I transferred content from its hard drive to some recordable DVDs (DVD-R), which I first had to format using the EX-77. Many of the DVD-Rs were never 'finalised', which meant I couldn't play them on any other systems.

However, a few years later I bought a Panasonic EX-97 recorder (£274 from www.snipca.com/52988, pictured below), which has two tuners for recording two programmes at once. I was pleased to find that my non-finalised DVD-Rs played on this without any problems. Perhaps DE Killingley could try connecting their external drives to a different Panasonic recorder or even one of the same model. It's worth a try.

William Mylles

Browser Tips

CHROME

Remove the new 'Tab groups' button

Google made lots of tweaks to Chrome in 2024, some of which were more useful than others. One of the most noticeable was the addition of a 'Tab groups' button to the browser's Bookmarks bar. This looks like a grid of four squares and appears to the left of your bookmarks (1 in screenshot below).

While this button will come in handy if you use Chrome's 'Tab groups' feature to organise your tabs into themed groups, it's otherwise likely to prove annoying.

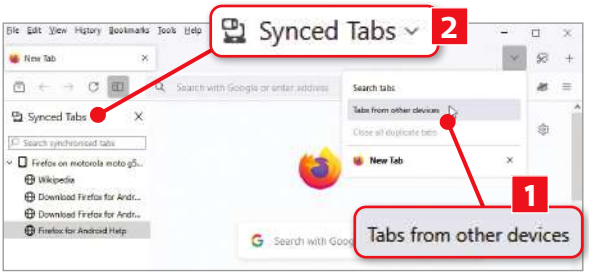
Thankfully, you can remove the 'Tab groups' button if you don't need it. Rather than right-click the button and choose Hide or Delete (which would be the obvious solution), you have to right-click elsewhere on the Bookmarks bar and deselect the 'Show tab groups' option 2. The button will then disappear.

To disable the 'Tab groups' button permanently, type chrome://flags into Chrome's address bar and press Enter to load the Experiments page. Find the entry Tab Groups Save UI Update 3, choose Disabled in its dropdown menu 4 and relaunch Chrome.

FIREFOX

View tabs on other devices more privately

Two years ago, Mozilla added a feature called Firefox View to its browser. This lists the tabs you currently have open or have closed recently, and lets you search your browsing history. It also offers the useful option to view tabs you have open on other devices, provided you're signed into your Mozilla account and have 'Open tabs' selected in Firefox's Sync settings.



However, it's fair to say Firefox users haven't embraced the View feature as enthusiastically as Mozilla hoped. Some have even highlighted privacy concerns, because anyone glancing at your Firefox View dashboard can see every web page you've visited on your PC and phone.

Version 133 of the browser (released at the end of November), addresses these worries by letting you view tabs on other devices without using Firefox View. This means you can remove the latter without losing access to your synced tabs.

Instead, simply click the 'List all tabs' (down-arrow) button in Firefox's top-right corner and choose 'Tabs from other devices' (1 in our screenshot above). This will display a list of Synced Tabs in the browser's left-hand sidebar 2. Click the title of a tab to open the synced page in the main window.

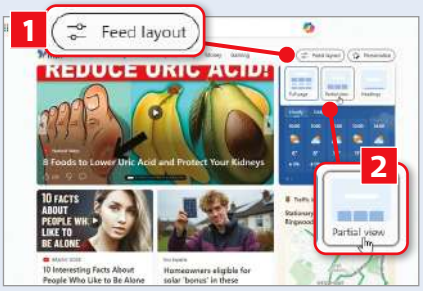
To hide Firefox View, right-click its icon in the top-left corner of the browser and choose 'Remove from Toolbar'.

EDGE

Browse your MSN feed on New Tab pages

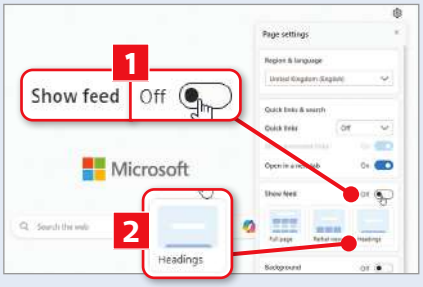
As we reported in Issue 698 (page 7), Microsoft has changed the name of its popular Start app to MSN – or rather

WORKSHOP Customise your MSN feed in Edge



1 Click the 'Feed layout' button 1 in the top-right corner of your MSN feed and switch from 'Full page' to 'Partial view' 2. This pushes the feed's content further down the New Tab page and presents it in a more condensed layout.

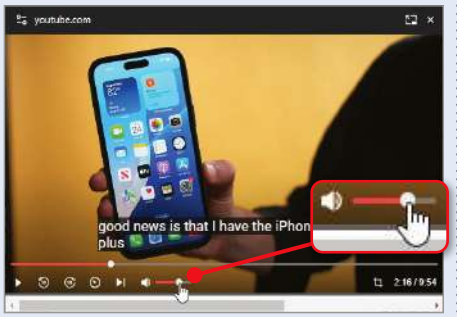
2 You can make the content of your MSN feed more relevant to your interests by clicking Personalise and 'following' different channels 1. Click 'Content settings' 2 to show or hide specific 'cards', including Weather, Traffic and Health.



3 To hide the MSN feed altogether, click the 'Page settings' cog in the top-right corner of the New Tab page and switch off 'Show feed' 1. Alternatively, choose 'Headings' 2 to show only the headlines and images from online articles.

BEST EXTENSION FOR... Watching picture-in-picture videos

Super PiP
Chromium
www.snipca.com/53168
Lots of websites now support picture-in-picture (PiP) mode, allowing you to view videos in a floating player window. Though it varies between browsers, the PiP player is often quite basic, so Super PiP gives you some useful extra controls. As well as a standard Play/Pause button, you can rewind and fast-forward in 10-second increments, adjust the volume using a slider (see screenshot), control the playback speed and skip to the next video in a playlist. Best of all, the extension displays subtitles on many streaming services, provided you enable them in the main player first. To switch to and from PIP mode, simply click Super PiP's toolbar button. Press the E or S key on your keyboard to expand or shrink the player window – the extension will remember the size for next time.



If you don't like that, try...
Picture-in-Picture for All Sites
Chromium
www.snipca.com/53169
This extension lacks Super PiP's range of controls, but works on any video site – even those that don't support PiP.

it has changed it back, because the app was originally called MSN News. This also applies to the Start page – or feed – in Edge, which is now called MSN, too.

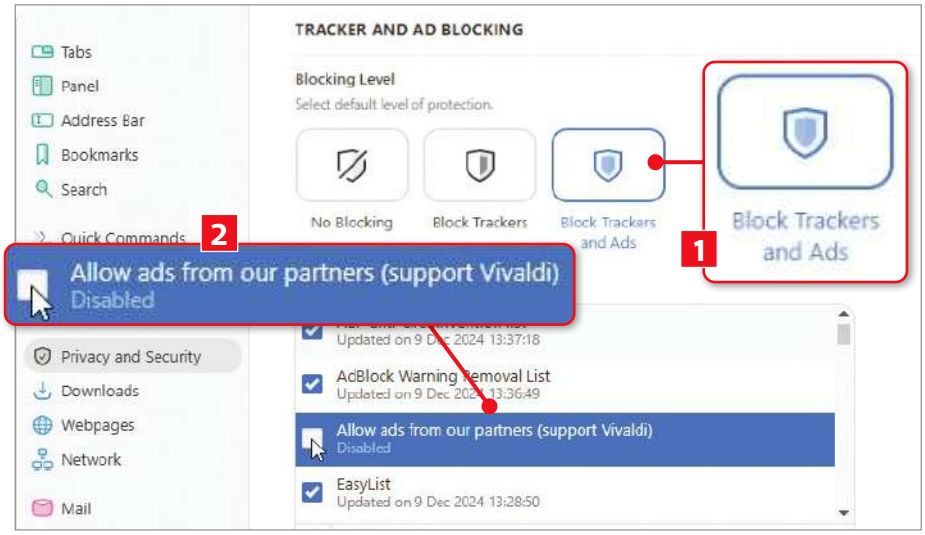
Your MSN feed displays news stories, online articles, the weather forecast, traffic updates, stock prices and more on the browser's New Tab page. Although some of its content is usually interesting, it can also feel overwhelming, so it's worth customising the feed to make it more relevant to you. See our Workshop on the opposite page to find out how.

VIVALDI
Decide whether to block all ads and trackers

Vivaldi has made some changes to its built-in tool for blocking ads and trackers. This means the browser will no longer block all such elements by default.

As Vivaldi explains in a blog post titled 'The great tracker blocker conundrum' (www.snipca.com/53162), the company relies heavily on revenue generated through its partnerships with search engines, so it can continue to provide its browser for free. Recently, these deals have produced "dwindling revenue", because Vivaldi's tracker blocker was preventing essential scripts from running.

As a consequence, the browser will now allow some tracking scripts to run, but only those required by its search partners and only when you click something that "is obviously an ad" – or sponsored link – in their search results. Vivaldi says all other trackers will remain blocked, and those that do load will not be able to follow you to other sites.



If that doesn't reassure you about your privacy, and you'd rather not see any ads or trackers, Vivaldi will still let you block them despite the potential loss in revenue. Click the menu button in the browser's top-left corner and choose Settings then 'Privacy and Security'.

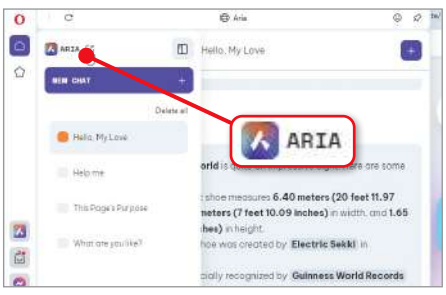
Scroll down to the 'Tracker and Ad Blocking' section, select 'Block Trackers and Ads' (1 in our screenshot above) and click the Manage Sources button. Under 'Ad Blocking Sources', untick the option to 'Allow ads from our partners (support Vivaldi)' 2.

OPERA
Chat with Aria in a new tab

Opera has added another way to interact with its AI assistant, Aria. You can now move your conversation from the browser's side panel to a new tab. This gives you more space and feels more natural than typing commands into the left-hand panel.

Click the Aria button in the sidebar to launch the AI tool, then click the Conversations icon in the top-left corner. Either select a past chat or start a new one. Click the new Open button (see screenshot below) to switch from the side panel to a new tab, where you can continue your conversation.

Don't forget that you can also ask Aria questions through Opera's Command Line tool. Press Ctrl+/ to open this, then type a query or prompt.



Phone and Tablet Tips

ANDROID & iOS

Enhance your video calls in Messenger

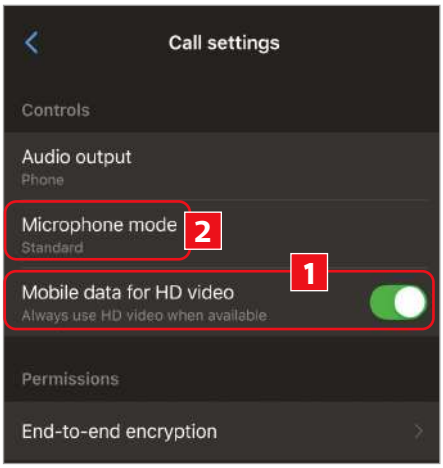
After focusing most of its attention on WhatsApp in 2024 (see next tip), Meta has added several useful features to its other messaging app, Messenger. These mainly focus on making your video calls "easier, more reliable and more fun".

For starters, all video calls made over Wi-Fi now use HD by default to provide a higher-quality picture. To use HD over a mobile connection too, tap the three-dot menu in the top-right corner of a Messenger call, choose 'Call settings' and switch on 'Mobile data for HD video' (1 in our screenshot below).

To improve the audio quality as well, tap 'Microphone mode' 2 and switch on 'Voice isolation'. This will reduce background noise so the other person can hear you more clearly.

Another useful new option lets you leave voice or video messages when someone doesn't answer your call. Tap the 'Record message' button to capture your audio or video message, then press Send.

Finally, Meta will soon introduce AI backgrounds that let you personalise your Messenger video calls with colourful themes. Once the feature is available, tap the Effects (smiley-face) icon during a call, select Backgrounds and either choose one of the AI images or enter a text prompt to generate your own.



ANDROID & iOS

Organise WhatsApp contacts into lists

Back in August 2024, WhatsApp added the option to save contacts as 'favourites', so you can message and call them more quickly (see Issue 690, page 44). It has now introduced a follow-up feature called Lists, which lets you organise people into themed lists such as Friends, Family and Neighbours.

Your lists join existing filters at the top of WhatsApp's Chats tab – including Unread, Favourites and Groups – so that tapping one shows only conversations with the people in that list. To create a list, tap the plus-sign button to the right of the other filters to open the 'New list' panel.

Give your list a suitable name (1 in our screenshot left), then press the 'Add people or groups' button 2 and select the contacts you want to add to the list. Tap the green tick button to save your list and it will appear in the filter bar at the top of the Chats tab.

To change the name of a list, or to add and remove people, long-press its filter and choose Edit. You can create as many lists as you want, and deleting them won't affect the contacts or chats they contain.

ANDROID & iOS

View your recent listening history in Spotify

Spotify has introduced a new feature called Recents, which lists all the songs, podcasts and audiobooks you've listened to over the last 90 days. This replaces the old Listening History option and will prove useful for "picking up a paused podcast, finding last week's earworm or finally playing that saved album or audiobook".

To access Recents in the Spotify app for Android (www.snipca.com/53089) or iOS (www.snipca.com/53090), tap your

BEST NEW APPS — What you should install this fortnight

DisMail

Free

Android www.snipca.com/53092

DisMail generates temporary email addresses you can use to register with websites and apps. This keeps your real address private and prevents spam. To create a fake email address, simply slide the green button and copy the result to your clipboard. Emails are sent to your DisMail Inbox, so you can verify account sign-ups.

DisMail
Unbox Privacy: Your Temporary Inbox Awaits!
Secure your inbox from spam with our disposable email app, ensuring hassle-free browsing and clutter-free sign-ups
m1w6uCjGOw@rteet.com
Tap on the email to copy to clipboard
Slide for Email

Merlin Bird ID

Free

Android www.snipca.com/53097

iOS www.snipca.com/53098

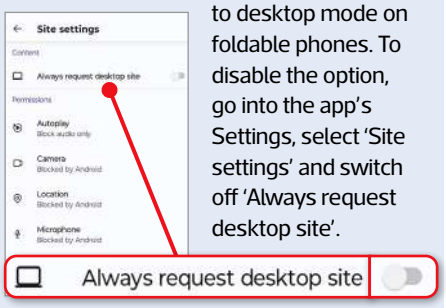
This brilliant free app for identifying birds from photos and sounds has been updated with some new features. Its 'Life List' tab, which stores details of birds you've identified, now suggests species to look out for in your area, while its Explore tab now provides images of every bird. Merlin has also improved its photo identification.

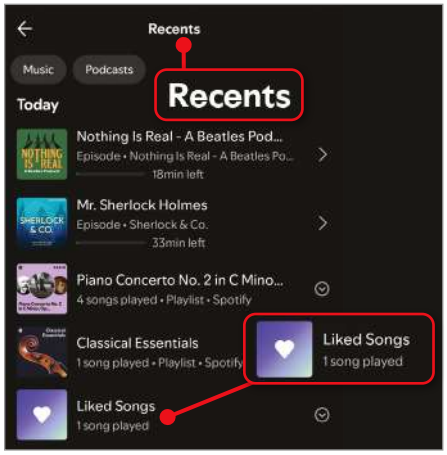
Firefox for Android tablets

Free

Android www.snipca.com/53102

Firefox for Android tablets now automatically loads the desktop versions of websites – rather than pared-down mobile sites – to make full use of the larger screen. The browser also defaults to desktop mode on foldable phones. To disable the option, go into the app's Settings, select 'Site settings' and switch off 'Always request desktop site'.





profile picture in the top-left corner and select Recents. All the music, podcasts and audiobooks you've played or saved over the past three months will be listed in reverse-chronological order, so you can tap them to resume listening. The Recents entries include tracks from playlists and Liked Songs (see screenshot above) that played in Spotify's Shuffle mode.

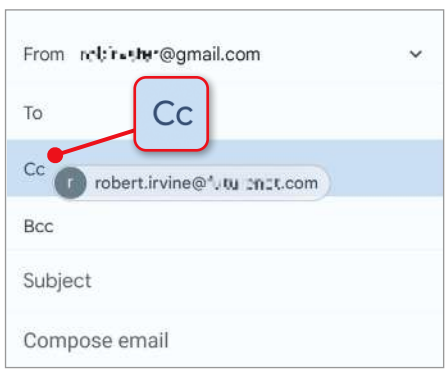
Unusually for Spotify, the new Recents feature is available to both free and Premium users.

ANDROID

Send Gmail messages to multiple recipients

Google has made a small but useful improvement to the Gmail app for Android, to make it easier to send emails to multiple recipients. Previously, when you wanted to copy people into a message, you needed to manually enter their email addresses in the 'Cc' (carbon copy) field – or the 'Bcc' (blind carbon copy) field to hide their details from other recipients.

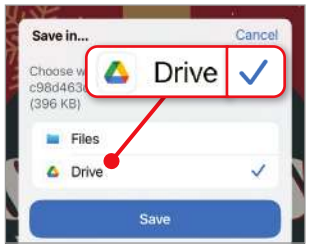
In the updated Gmail app, you can just drag and drop a contact's name or an email address from the 'To' field to 'Cc' (see screenshot below) or 'Bcc' – or vice versa. The two carbon-copy fields will open automatically when you long-press a recipient's name or email, so you can address the message correctly with minimal typing.



iOS

Download files to Google Drive

Google has updated the iOS version of its Chrome browser (www.snipca.com/52939) with the option to save files directly to Google Drive rather than download them to your device. It says this will help you save space on your iPhone or iPad, though curiously it doesn't offer the feature in the Android version of Chrome.

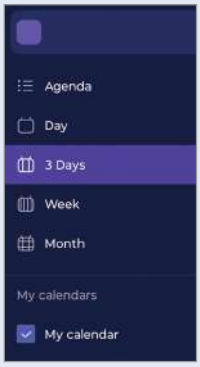


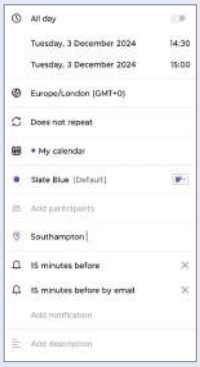
To save a file from Chrome to Google Drive, select the Drive option (see screenshot left) after tapping the Download button and choose your Google account. Downloaded items will be saved to a new folder in Google Drive called 'Saved from Chrome'. Additionally, if you have Google Photos installed on your iPhone or iPad, you can save images from websites directly to that app. Simply long-press a picture you're viewing in Chrome and select 'Save in Google Photos'.

BEST APPS FOR... Updating your calendar in 2025

Proton Calendar

Free*
Android www.snipca.com/53103
iOS www.snipca.com/53104
Proton Calendar is a private alternative to Google Calendar that protects your events using end-to-end encryption. You can switch between day, three-day, week and month views, and light and dark modes. The Android app can display your schedule in a widget on your home screen – a feature coming to the iOS version soon.
Best For Encrypting your calendar





Birthday Calendar Reminder

Free*
Android www.snipca.com/53106
iOS www.snipca.com/53107
Ensure you don't miss anyone's birthday in 2025 by installing this calendar/reminder app. Import birthday info from your contacts, existing calendar or a CSV or XLSX file, and choose when you want to be reminded, such as on the day or weeks in advance. You can also add birthdays manually.
Best For Getting birthday reminders

TimeTree

Free*
Android www.snipca.com/53108
iOS www.snipca.com/53109
TimeTree is a popular shared-calendar app, which helps you keep family, friends and work schedules in sync. It lets you create and join multiple calendars for different purposes, receive notifications for new and updated events, and chat within events to confirm the details. You can also access your calendars in a web browser.
Best For Managing multiple calendars

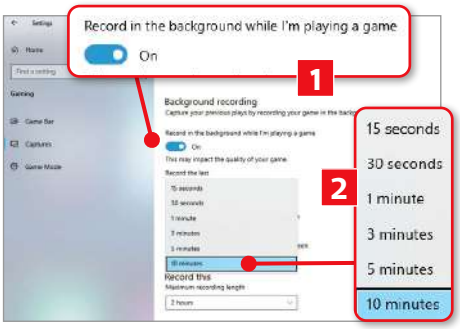
*Contains in-app purchases

WINDOWS 10 & 11

Record the previous 30 seconds in games

Game Bar in Windows lets you record videos of games as you play them (though you can use it to record anything you do on your computer). One of its smartest features is to record the previous moments of a game. You can activate this when you've done something memorable and want to capture it as a video.

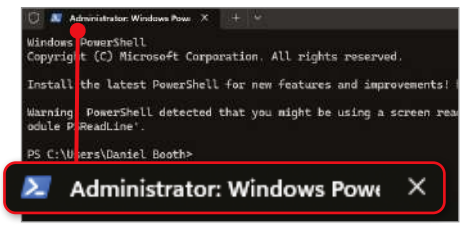
First, press Windows key+I to open Settings, then click Gaming. Turn on the Game Bar slider at the top of the page. Next, click Captures on the left (or in the centre in Windows 11), then turn on 'Record in the background while I'm playing a game' (1 in our screenshot below). Now set how long you want to record for (from 15 seconds to 10 minutes) 2. This means Game Bar is always recording in the background, but you'll only save the amount of time you set when you press the Windows+Alt+G keyboard shortcut. The clip will be saved in your Videos, Captures folder.



WINDOWS 10 & 11

Launch tools in admin mode using keyboard shortcut

Some Windows tools (like Command Prompt/PowerShell) and third-party programs (including several from NirSoft – see above right) offer more features when you use them in admin mode. You can usually open these by right-clicking their taskbar icon and selecting 'Run as administrator', but you can also do this by keeping the keyboard shortcut Ctrl+Shift pressed then clicking the icon.


Windows PowerShell
Copyright (C) Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved.
Install the latest PowerShell for new features and improvements!
PS C:\Users\Daniel Booth>
Administrator: Windows Powe

If you open Command Prompt/PowerShell in admin mode, you'll see it confirmed at the top left (pictured below left).

WINDOWS 10 & 11

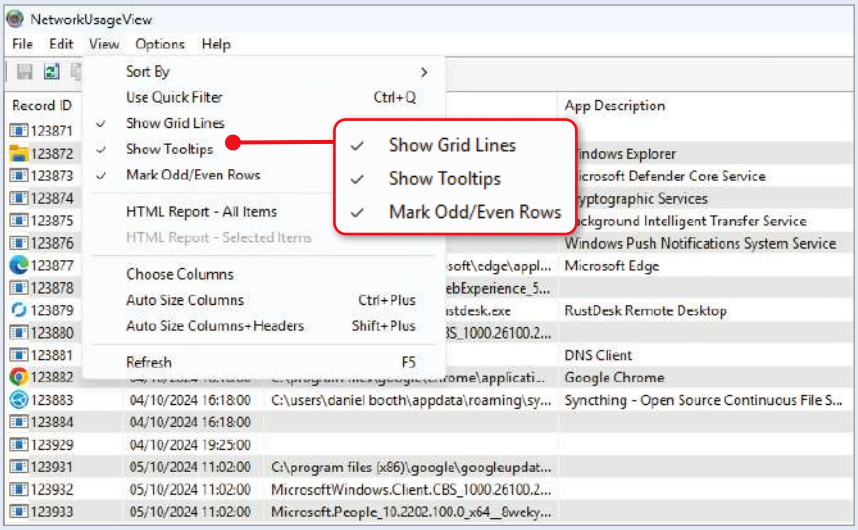
See how much data your programs are using in NetworkUsageView

NirSoft, one of our favourite software developers, has updated NetworkUsageView to fix a bug that was causing it to crash on computers running the Windows 11 24H2 update.

This program shows how much data your programs have used, letting you identify those that hog a lot of your resources – look in the Bytes Sent and Received columns on the right. You can see this information in Windows Settings and Task Manager, but NetworkUsageView has a better design.

Visit www.snipca.com/53100 then scroll down to the bottom and click either the 32bit or 64bit download link (under the Feedback heading) depending on which type of processor your computer has. Extract the ZIP file then launch the program.

Like most NirSoft tools, you can make the information easier to see by clicking View then ticking Show Grid Lines and Mark Odd/Even Rows (see screenshot). This option is also available in NirSoft's WebBrowserPassView (see page 20).



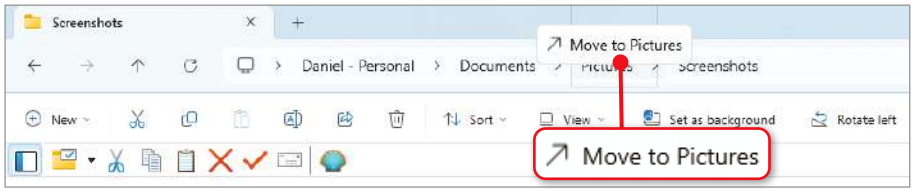
WINDOWS 11

Drag files on to File Explorer's 'breadcrumbs' bar

The 24H2 update to Windows 11, released in the autumn, brings back the option to move files by dragging and dropping them on to the address bar in File Explorer. Microsoft removed this back in 2021, much to the annoyance of users. To do it, just click on a file and while holding this down move the file to the bar. Release it when you see the 'Move to...' prompt appear.

In our example, we've moved a file to the Pictures folder (see screenshot below), though we could instead have placed it in Documents or Screenshots.

Incidentally, the File Explorer bar uses a 'breadcrumbs' design – named after Hansel and Gretel's trick to leave a path returning home. It shows the 'trail' of one folder inside another.

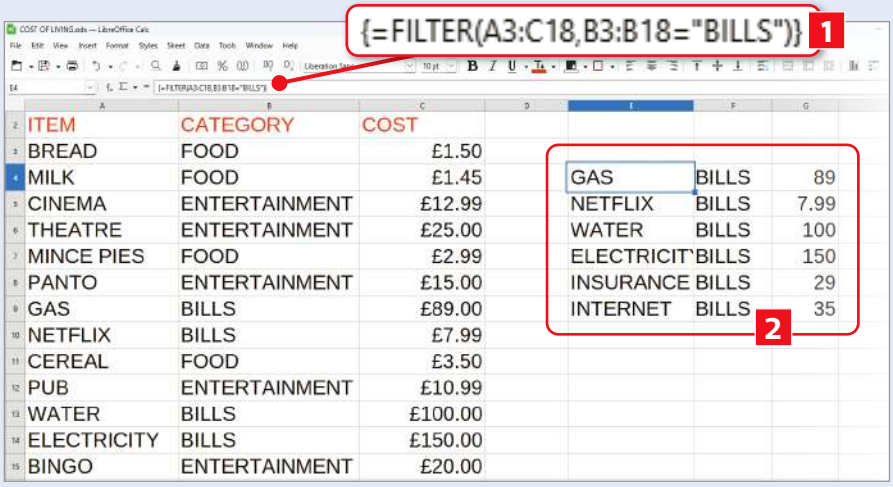


LIBREOFFICE CALC & MICROSOFT EXCEL

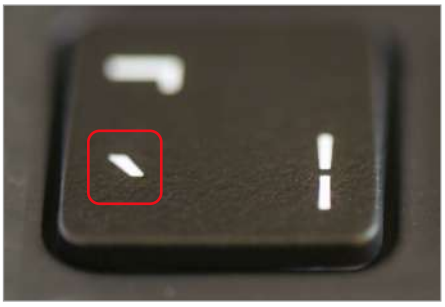
Use the Filter function to extract spreadsheet data

One of the most useful spreadsheet functions added to LibreOffice 24.8, released in August, is 'Filter'. This tool, which Microsoft added to Excel several years ago, extracts rows or columns based on specific conditions that you type, saving you from having to scroll through large spreadsheets.

In our example, we want to extract all the data marked as 'Bills' from our expenses spreadsheet. We click in the cell we want this data to appear (E4), then type `=FILTER(A3:C18,B3:B18='BILLS')` – 1 in our screenshot. When we press Enter, Calc adds the curly brackets (also called braces) to the beginning and end of the function.



We chose A3:C18 because that's the range of data we're searching, while B3:B18 is the column containing the condition we're searching for ('Bills'). The results begin in E4, and appear down to G9 2.



LIBREOFFICE CALC & MICROSOFT WORD

Switch between data and formula with keyboard shortcut

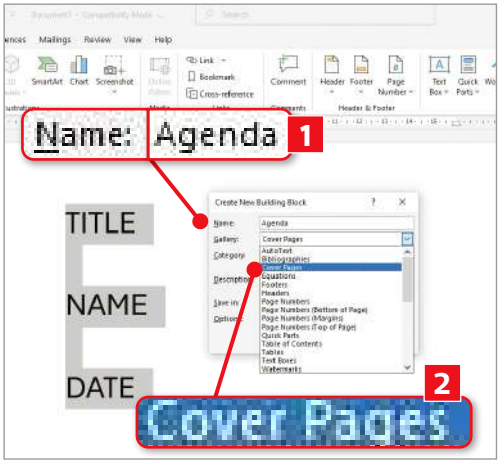
Pressing Ctrl+` lets you quickly switch between seeing the data in your spreadsheet and the formulas you're using in it. The symbol, called a grave accent, is a small diagonal line running from top left to bottom right and looks like a single quote mark (pictured). It's typically found at the top left of keyboards.

MICROSOFT WORD

Create Cover Pages to reuse

You can create cover-page templates using Word's Quick Parts tool, making it easy to choose and open the one you need.

First, add the required details to your cover page – such as name, title, date and so on. Press Ctrl+A to highlight the whole thing, then click the Quick Parts dropdown menu and select 'Save Selection to Quick Part Gallery'. Give the template a name (1 in our screenshot above), then choose Cover Pages in the Gallery dropdown menu 2. Click OK.



Now open a document then click Insert followed by Cover Page at the top left. Look for the template you added then click it to make it appear.

ONLYOFFICE

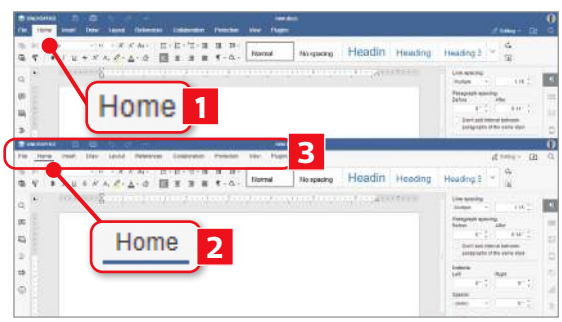
Change appearance of tabs when you hover over them

Version 8.2 of OnlyOffice, released in October, adds a subtle redesign for all the tools – covering documents, PDF forms, presentations and spreadsheets. By default, when you hover your cursor over the options on the top toolbar, they appear darker to highlight them – 1 in our screenshot below. OnlyOffice calls this the 'Fill' option.

You can now change this so a line appears underneath the option's title, as shown in screenshot 2, making it easier to see you've selected the right section.

To do this, click File at the top left, then Advanced Settings at the bottom. Now look for the Appearance heading and choose Line in the 'Tab style' dropdown menu.

There's another new option in the Appearance section called 'Use toolbar color as tabs background'. Tick this and the colour of the tabs as you hover over them will be the same as the toolbar 3, as shown in our screenshot.



In The Club

Run a club or society? Here's how your tech can make it easier

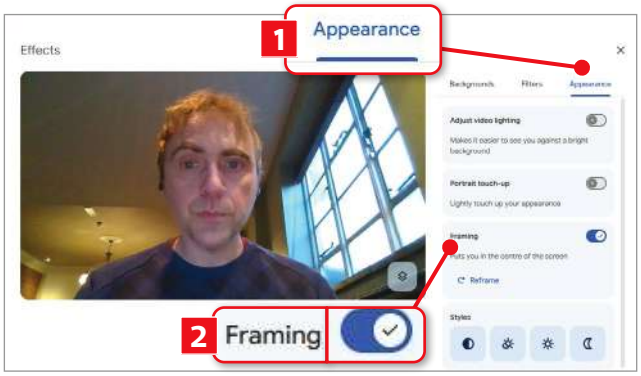
Centre yourself in video meetings

When your club has video meetings, you'll be seen more clearly and understood better if you're positioned in the middle of everyone's screen. It means they'll get a better view of your facial expressions and physical gestures, which often get lost in virtual meetings.

Google introduced automatic centring in its Meet video-chat tool in 2022, but only for customers of its business-focused Workplace packages (from £5 per user per month: www.snipca.com/53095). In November, it made this feature part of the free version of Meet, meaning anyone can use it (see www.snipca.com/53094).

It's turned on by default, so you might have already benefitted from it without realising. To check that it's activated, open Meet by clicking its video-camera icon in your Gmail panel. Now start a video chat, then click the 'More options' (three vertical dots) icon at the top right of your video, followed by 'Apply visual effects'. Now click the Appearance tab (1 in our screenshot above right) and make sure the Framing slider is turned on (blue) 2.

With this setting turned on, Google Meet will automatically centre you. It happens only once, so other people in the meeting won't be distracted by repeatedly seeing your face moving from the side to the centre. However, if the centring isn't accurate – or it stops working – you can recentre yourself by hovering your cursor over the tile showing your face, then clicking the 'More options' menu icon followed by Reframe.



Turn on the Framing slider to make sure Google Meet centres you in video chats

For centring to work properly you'll need hardware acceleration turned on in Chrome. This is because the video processing needed for centering relies on your computer's GPU. Click the three vertical dots at the top right of a Chrome window, then Settings at the bottom. Now click System on the left, then turn on 'Use graphics acceleration when available'. You'll need to restart Chrome for this to take effect.

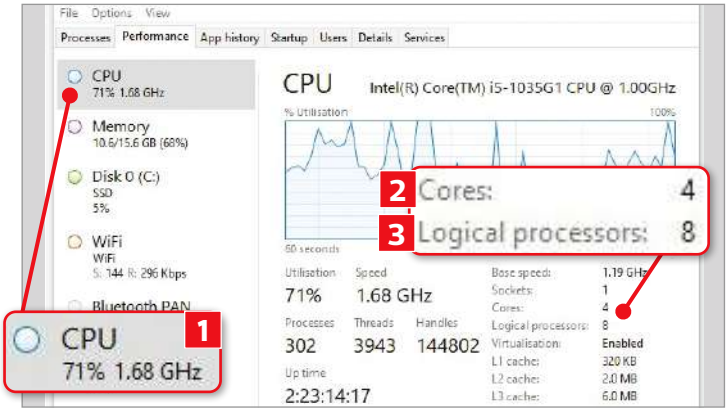
Your computer's processor will also need a minimum of two cores with hyper-threading. This squeezes more power out of each core. Most computers made in the past five to seven years will have this specification. To check, search for and open Task Manager in Windows (or press Ctrl+Shift+Esc), then click the Performance tab.

Now click CPU on the left (1 in our screenshot below left) and on the right you'll see how many cores you have 2. If your PC has hyper-threading, then the number of logical processors will be double this 3.

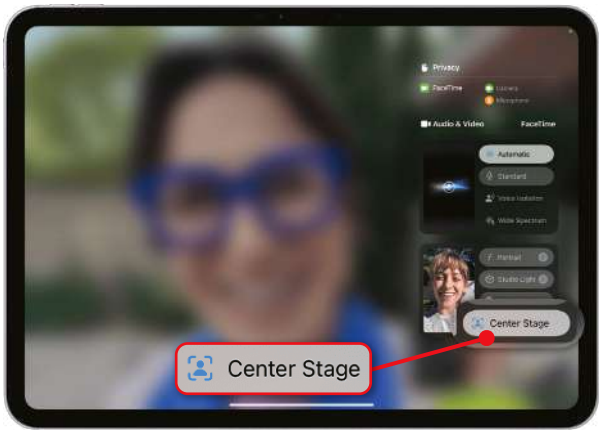
Select 'Center Stage' on an iPad

The only other video-chat tool to centre your face is Apple's Center Stage, which works on iPads and Macs. It works with most video apps, not just Apple's FaceTime. To use it on an iPad, swipe down from the top-right corner of your screen, then tap the Controls button (in iPadOS 17 or earlier, tap the Video Effects button). Now tap the Center Stage button (see screenshot below).

You'll need a relatively modern device to use it, though – visit www.snipca.com/53096 then scroll down to 'Center Stage system requirements' for more information.



If you have double the number of logical cores as normal, your computer supports hyper-threading



Tap 'Center Stage' on your iPad to centre your face during meetings

Next issue: Create and share a digital notebook

What's All the

Fuss About...

Google GenCast

AI is about to make long-term weather forecasts much more accurate

What is it?

A new weather-forecasting system powered by AI that Google claims provides "more accurate forecasts up to 15 days ahead". Created by DeepMind, Google's AI laboratory, it's better than many previous systems because it uses a diffusion AI model. But before we explain what that means, we need to talk about the difference between probabilistic and deterministic models to predict the weather.

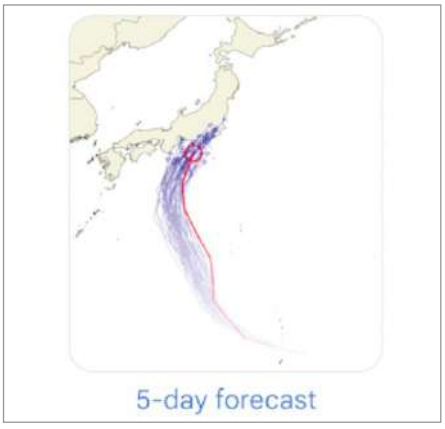
OK, go ahead...

Historically, weather forecasts were largely deterministic, giving a single outcome based on numerical weather prediction (NWP) models. These models use complex equations to simulate atmospheric behaviour, but don't take into account uncertainty. For example, they might forecast two inches of rain or 15°C temperatures without indicating how likely those outcomes are.

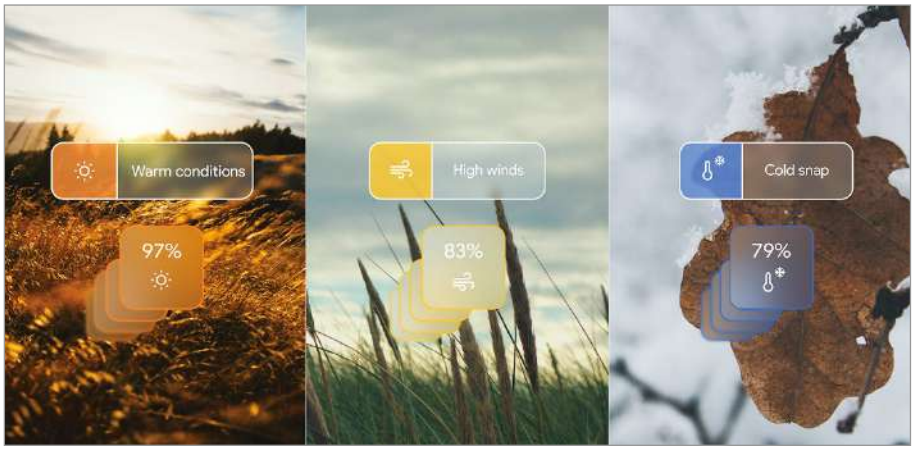
By contrast, probabilistic models generate a range of possible outcomes by running multiple simulations. This factors in uncertainties, such as variations in initial conditions. A probabilistic forecast might state there's a '70 per cent chance of rain' instead of simply stating that rain is expected. Such forecasts are particularly valuable for complex weather systems and long-range predictions.

And is GenCast probabilistic?

Yes, but so are most modern forecast systems. The Met Office for instance has been using one since the 1990s. It's Google's use of diffusion that marks GenCast apart from all these.



GenCast gave a reasonably accurate prediction of where Typhoon Hagibis would make landfall



Ah yes – you should probably explain that now...

Certainly. Diffusion is a type of probabilistic forecasting that 'denoises' raw data from radars, weather sensors and satellite images. This data might include random and inaccurate (or 'noisy') measurements.

Diffusion models like GenCast first add *more* noise to the forecast, like changes in temperature and humidity, to simulate different atmospheric conditions. They then remove this extra data (or denoise it), "This Magazine Free on SoftArchives" which lets it create a more refined – and therefore more accurate – forecast. It's like adding a cleaning solution to a dirty surface. Initially, it might look messier, but as you wipe away the grime, the surface becomes cleaner than if you'd just tried to scrub it without the solution. You may already have used denoising without realising it.

? Really? How

Audio-editing software such as Audacity denoises data like hums, clicks and static when converting music, as does video-editing software like DaVinci when removing grainy pixels. GenCast takes this further because it's adapted to the spherical geometry of the Earth, helping to better predict complex weather. It was also fed four decades of historical weather data from the European Centre for Medium-Range Weather Forecasts (ECMWF), which is an independent intergovernmental organization supported by 34 European countries, including the UK.

Has Google tested it?

Yes, it compared GenCast with the ECMWF's own system and found it was more accurate in 97.2 per cent of forecasts of past weather events, and in 99.8 per cent that were made 36 hours in advance (see www.snipca.com/53175). To show this, Google released GenCast's five-day forecast for Typhoon Hagibis (pictured left), which killed over 100 people when it hit Japan in 2019. The blue lines are the possible routes GenCast predicted, while the red is where it made landfall. It was pretty close.

Is it available for the public to use?

Not directly. Instead, Google has released it to meteorologists so they can build more accurate forecasting systems. It'll improve long-range forecasts more than short-range, helping authorities prepare for extreme weather events.

So that image above isn't GenCast?

No, that's just Google's own generic illustration for what a weather app could look like, predicting sunshine, wind and snow with probability percentages. We'll take the one on the left all summer long.

Your Favourite SOFTWARE REVEALED!

We recommended hundreds of free programs in 2024, but which were the most popular with you? Robert Irvine reveals your top 20 tools and explains how to master them all

With another year over, it's interesting to reflect on all the software we've written about – and you've read about – over the past 12 months. In every issue of *Computeractive*, we aim to bring you the best new and updated tools, but some inevitably prove more popular than others.

We're able to measure this popularity through our Snipca service, which turns long web addresses into short, simple links. These URLs are quicker to type, take up less space on the page and ensure we safely direct you to the correct web pages.

Snipca also tells us how many times each link has been clicked – or tapped in our digital editions – so we can see which programs and apps you find most useful. This data is collected anonymously (only the number of clicks is recorded), and allows us to tailor the content of the magazine accordingly. After all, there's little point in us writing workshops about software nobody's interested in, and we'd be foolish not to provide tips for programs you obviously love.

In this feature, based on those Snipca clicks, we reveal your favourite free software of 2024. Your top 20 most-downloaded tools are an illuminating reflection of the varied needs and interests of *Computeractive* readers, mixing familiar names with new programs we'd never covered before last year.

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You can read every feature, workshop and review referred to in this feature on our new 2024 Back Issue CD and USB Stick. These contain searchable PDFs of all 26 issues from 2024 to give you one-click access to all our recommendations and advice. You'll be able to order the Back Issue CD and the USB stick soon from www.snipca.com/53179 and www.snipca.com/53180 respectively.

YOUR FAVOURITE PROGRAM OF 2024

1 Glow

www.snipca.com/52372

The free system-information tool Glow was your favourite program of 2024 by a considerable margin, attracting almost twice as many of your clicks as the runner-up. We wrote about Glow several times throughout the year, in our Best Free Software section, our 'Take the ultimate PC health check' feature in Issue 677 (page 62) and most recently in our Workshop in Issue 699 (page 38), which covered its new RAM-checking functions.

Aside from its simplicity and quality, the reason we recommended – and you downloaded – Glow so often is that it was regularly updated with useful new features, design tweaks and other improvements. However, this almost wasn't the case – a year ago, developer Eray Türkay announced that Glow 3.00 would be the final version because the program was "where I wanted it to be" (see Issue 676, page 19).

Thankfully, he soon changed his mind – which may be partly because of your keen interest in the software – and Glow has continued to evolve and improve. Its version-numbering system was revised – the latest is 24.21 – and Glow now has its own web page as well as a GitHub repository (www.snipca.com/53114).

Best of all, Glow now provides more than 250 insights into your PC's hardware and software, across sections including Operating System, Motherboard, Processor, Memory, Graphics Card, Storage and Sound. Select one in its left-hand menu to view information about specific components – details that have become more accurate and comprehensive with each update.

If you need to know, for example, how much RAM your PC has installed, the model number of your CPU or the amount of free space on your SSD, Glow will tell you in a jiffy. It also checks components are working smoothly and reveals small but interesting details such as when your version of Windows was installed, your monitor's refresh rate and when your system last suffered the dreaded Blue screen of death.

What makes Glow so special

Glow has transcended its origins as an alternative to Piriform's Speccy (www.ccleaner.com/speccy) by introducing practical options for identifying and fixing PC problems. You can access these in its Tools menu top right (1 in our screenshot above) or by using their keyboard shortcuts. They include tools for deleting junk files, benchmarking your CPU and hard drive(s), testing your RAM, troubleshooting network issues and much more. We particularly like the monitor-test tool 2 added in Glow 24.09 (see Issue 686, page 18) that identifies 'dead pixels' on your screen, and the tool that reveals forgotten Wi-Fi passwords.

Glow's Tools menu includes practical options for identifying and fixing your PC's problems

Click the Settings button top right to switch Glow between a light and dark theme, and use its Hiding Mode to conceal private information from its analysis of your system. This includes your email address, device ID and hardware serial numbers, and prevents that data from being viewed without your permission.

You can save your Glow data for future reference by clicking the Export button 3 at the bottom of the left-hand menu. Choose between TXT and HTML format, then click Create Report. We can't wait to discover what further innovations Glow will introduce in 2025.

Note that, because it's made by an independent developer, Glow may trigger a Microsoft Defender SmartScreen warning. However, it's completely safe to use – see its clean bill of health on VirusTotal at www.snipca.com/53111. After you extract Glow's installer from its ZIP archive, and double-click the EXE file, just click 'More info' then 'Run anyway'.

Top tip for 2025

The latest version of Glow improves its feature for gauging the health of your laptop's battery. Select 'Battery' in the left-hand menu, then click the Generate Battery Report button (see screenshot below) to create an HTML log you can open in your browser.

This report tells you the cycle count of your laptop's battery, which is the number of times it's been drained (most batteries last for at least 500 cycles). It also provides a week-by-week breakdown of how long your laptop ran on battery and mains power, and the effect this had on its battery capacity and life.

Generate a battery report in Glow to verify the health of your laptop battery

YOUR OTHER TOP 10 FAVOURITE SOFTWARE

2 Files
www.snipca.com/53064

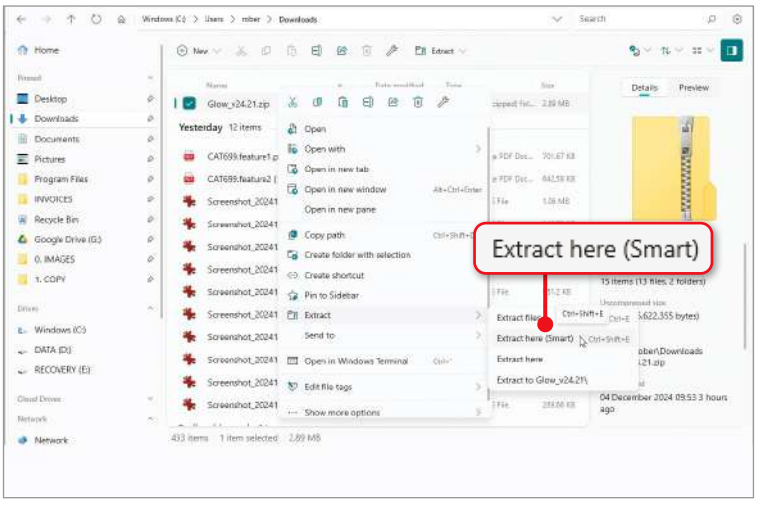
Files is another tool we recommended many times in 2024, as it continued to impress us with its innovative features, smart design and frequent updates. These always involved a significant progression from the previous version, not just a few minor 'bug fixes'. You clearly shared our enthusiasm, as Files rose from being your ninth most-downloaded program of 2023 to your second favourite of 2024.

Over the last 12 months, this fantastic free alternative to Files Explorer has introduced lots of useful options you won't find in the built-in Windows tool. These include Smart Extract (see screenshot below), which makes it easier to extract the contents of ZIP files and other compressed archives, and the new Cloud Drives feature, which lets you browse folders in online-storage services such as OneDrive, Google Drive and Dropbox.

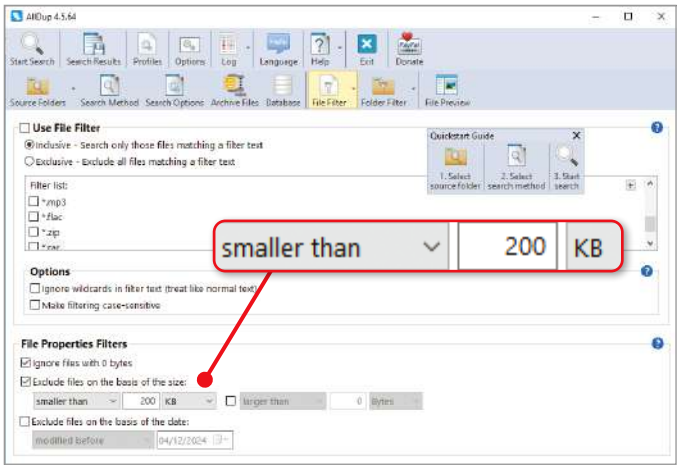
In May, Files teamed up with the powerful search tool Listary, allowing you to find any file in seconds (see our Workshop in Issue 685, page 38), and in June it added a dual-pane mode that lets you view two folders or drives side by side. We also liked its new Command Palette, which lets you perform dozens of quick actions by pressing Ctrl+Shift+P and typing a keyword or two.

Top tip for 2025

Files now lets you open more than 10 files simultaneously, rather than one by one. Select as many items as you want by ticking their boxes in the folder list or grid, then right-click and choose Open. All the selected files will then open in their default programs.



Files' Smart Extract option makes it easier to extract the contents of ZIP files



To speed things up exclude small files from AllDup's thorough scans for duplicate items

3 AllDup
www.snipca.com/49056

The superb duplicate cleaner AllDup was your third most-downloaded software of 2024 – returning to the top 10 for the first time since 2021. It achieved this lofty position almost entirely due to its appearance in our 'Remove all duplicate files' Cover Feature in Issue 677 (pictured right), where it won our Gold award in a rigorous comparison of similar tools.

"AllDup provides everything you need from a duplicate cleaner," we said in our review. "It's versatile, powerful and speedy, and doesn't restrict any options to a paid-for version. We praised the program's ability to remove unnecessary copies of any type of file from your PC – from photos and videos to documents and music – allowing you to free up drive space and speed up your system.

In our tests, AllDup took a mere 22 seconds to find 1,514 duplicates in our Downloads, Documents and Desktop folders, which were taking up 244MB of storage. It can also scan external storage such as USB sticks and NAS drives, and within compressed archive files.

Since we wrote about AllDup last February, it's improved its options for finding items with similar names, and audio and video files of the same lengths. Hopefully, we'll see a more substantial update in 2025.

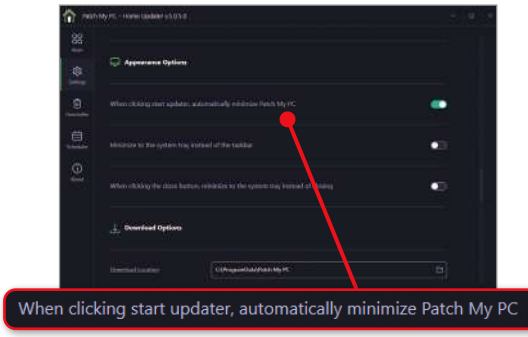
Top tip for 2025

AllDup's thorough scans can produce thousands of results to sift through, including tiny duplicate files that don't take up much space. To save yourself time in 2025, click the File Filter tab and exclude files smaller than, for example, 200KB (see screenshot above).

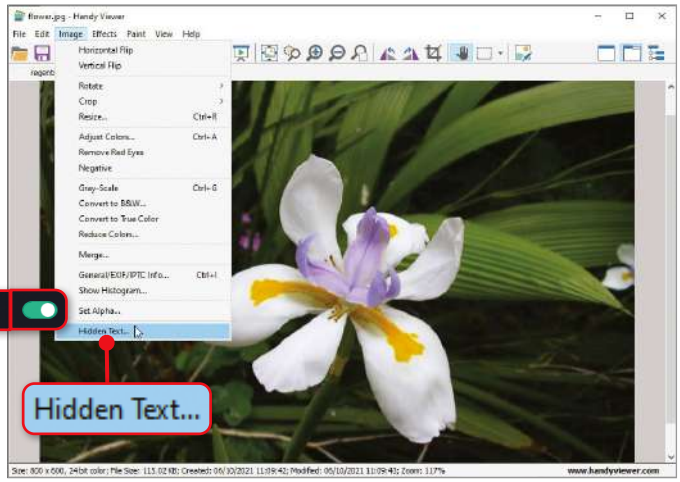
4 Patch My PC Home Updater
www.snipca.com/52607

We were so excited by the release of Patch My PC Home Updater 5 in October that we made it the focus of our 'Never miss another software update' Cover Feature in Issue 697. It seems you were pleased to see it back too, because thousands of you downloaded the new version of the software updater in the last two months of the year. That short time frame makes its fourth place in this list especially noteworthy – in 2022, when the last version was released, it only made tenth.

With a redesigned interface, improved search tool and new dark theme, Patch My PC Home Updater 5 is easier to use than ever and gentler on your eyes. This gives you no excuse for having outdated programs on your PC, when you can install the latest versions with one click.



Set Patch My PC to minimise to your taskbar while updating software



Handy Viewer is packed with useful features including a Hidden Text tool that lets you conceal messages inside images

Patch My PC Home Updater offers lots of useful options, such as scheduling updates for convenient times, automatically checking for new versions and installing updates 'silently' so you don't need to click confirmation prompts. It can also remove unwanted programs and even update portable tools stored on a USB stick.

Top tip for 2025

Rather than keep Patch My PC open to update your software, you can automatically minimise it to your taskbar. Click the Settings tab, scroll down to Appearance Options and switch on 'When clicking start updater, automatically minimize Patch My PC' (see screenshot above).

5 Any Video Converter

www.snipca.com/51033

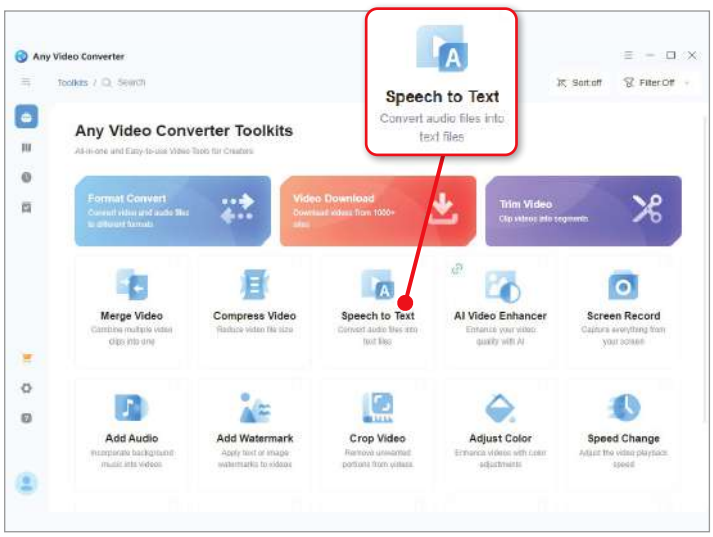
Any Video Converter (AVC) went from strength to strength in 2024, and deserves its place in your top five favourite programs. It's a versatile free program (a paid-for version is also available), with an ever-expanding range of tools that go far beyond merely converting videos.

AVC began the year by bringing back one of the features it removed in 2023 – the ability to burn videos to DVD so you can watch them on your TV. It also added a clever 'Speech to Text' option, which uses AI to generate subtitles by extracting the audio from your videos. We liked this feature so much, we made it the subject of our Workshop in Issue 677 (page 38).

Shortly afterwards, AVC improved its Screen Record tool to let you capture audio and video simultaneously – handy for creating your own tutorials, though the free edition limits you to three-minute recordings. Then in June, AVC was updated to version 9, which redesigned its interface to make all its features instantly accessible from the home screen.

Top tip for 2025

The latest version of Any Video Converter (9.05) updates the 'Speech to Text' tool to let you convert audio files as well as video soundtracks into text. Click 'Speech to Text' (see screenshot below) then the Add button to open an audio file – supported formats include MP3, WAV and FLAC.



Any Video Converter's 'Speech to Text' tool converts video and audio into text

6 Handy Viewer

www.snipca.com/50755

Handy Viewer made two appearances in our Best Free Software section in 2024, plus our Workshop in Issue 684 (page 38), garnering enough clicks to make it your sixth-favourite program. Considering it was only publicly released a year ago, that's an impressive achievement.

Unlike the older image viewers IrfanView and FastStone Image Viewer (neither of which made your top 20), Handy Viewer offers tabbed browsing. This lets you open and switch between dozens of photos – just click the View menu and choose Tabs View. It also goes beyond the basic editing tools you find in most image viewers to offer all types of creative effects and enhancements.

These include tinting, blurring and warping images; applying mosaic, pencil-sketch and reflection effects; and erasing, cloning and retouching picture elements – including red-eye. Handy Viewer was updated several times in 2024, adding support for layers among other useful features.

Top tip for 2025

Handy Viewer has a steganography option that hides text inside images. Click the Image menu, select Hidden Text (see screenshot above) and type the message you want to conceal. Click 'Write' to save the text in the image, then Read to reveal it in future.

7 WizTree

www.snipca.com/52545

WizTree has long been our favourite drive-space analyser for discovering which files and folders take up the most room on your PC. Its seventh place in your list confirms you

like WizTree too, after we made it our lead program in Issue 681's Best Free Software section (page 18).

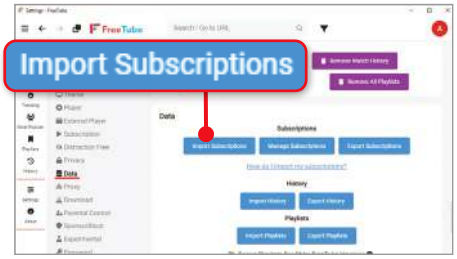
WizTree is impressively fast, free for personal use and helps you quickly identify and delete space hogs using its colour-coded 'tree map'. However, it was the addition of a duplicate cleaner that caught our attention last April.

To use this new feature, perform a scan of your hard drive then click the File View tab. Click the Duplicate Files dropdown menu and select 'Locate by Name, Size, Date', then click the plus signs next to the result to view duplicate details. Unlike AllDup, WizTree doesn't compare the contents of files, so double-check before deleting anything.

Top tip for 2025

In October, WizTree added the handy option to expand all the folders in its Tree View in one go. Either click the File menu and choose Expand All (see screenshot left) or press Shift+F4. Select 'Reset tree expansion' or press F4 to undo this action.

WizTree now lets you expand all the folders on your hard drive in one go



Export your YouTube subscriptions and import them into FreeTube

8 FreeTube

www.snipca.com/51885

FreeTube makes your top 10 most popular downloads for the second successive year, though it slips one place from seventh in 2023. The majority of your clicks followed its appearance in our Best Free Software section in Issue 692, where we revealed the latest improvements to this private front-end for YouTube.

These include a redesigned Playlists feature that makes it easier to add and organise videos, and offers to remove duplicates. FreeTube also tells you when the Trending and Most Popular feeds were last updated on YouTube – click Refresh or press R to update manually.

Computer active READER OFFER!

Upgrade to Windows 11 Pro for just £49.99!

Your PC almost certainly came with Windows 11 Home. But did you know it's easy to upgrade to **Windows 11 Pro** to get advanced features like BitLocker drive encryption?

There's need to install a new version of Windows – just take your new Professional key, go to System, Activate, then select 'Change Product Key'.

To upgrade, visit **www.snipca.com/50563** and click the red **Buy Now** button on the right.

JUST SO YOU KNOW...

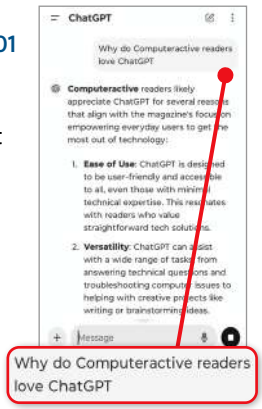
This offer can be used by one person only, and expires at midnight on **14 January, 2025**. It's a lifetime licence for one computer.

Your top 5 favourite mobile apps of 2024

1 ChatGPT

Android www.snipca.com/49601
iOS www.snipca.com/49602

The brilliant AI assistant ChatGPT (pictured) was not only your favourite tool from our 'Best new free apps you'll never stop using' Cover Feature in Issue 680, but your most-installed app of 2024. Look out for more in-depth ChatGPT coverage in 2025.



2 MSN (Start)

Android www.snipca.com/53143
iOS www.snipca.com/53144

Microsoft Start (since rebranded 'MSN') proved amazingly popular when we mentioned its accurate weather forecasts in Issue 686's News section (page 9). We subsequently devoted a whole feature to the app in Issue 690 (page 62).

3 Toilet Finder

Android www.snipca.com/49596
iOS www.snipca.com/49597

The second most-installed app from Issue 680's Cover Feature addresses the diminishing number of public conveniences. It can automatically detect your location, or you can search for a place before you arrive, to show the nearest toilets marked on a map.

4 Here WeGo Maps

Android www.snipca.com/49587
iOS www.snipca.com/49588

Many of you were clearly frustrated with Google Maps in 2024, because alternative mapping apps proved incredibly popular. Here WeGo Maps is packed with useful navigation tools and lets you download maps to explore offline.

5 Magic Earth

Android www.snipca.com/53146
iOS www.snipca.com/53147

We recommended Magic Earth in our 'Stop Google Maps spying on you' feature in Issue 696 (page 62). This privacy-focused mapping app includes an excellent route planner, traffic updates and lots of other useful information.

Most importantly, Free Tube has been updated to keep up with YouTube's latest changes to ensure you can continue watching videos without Google's ads or trackers. Click 'More info' then 'Run anyway' if it triggers a SmartScreen warning.

Top tip for 2025

FreeTube's latest version (0.22.0) speeds up the process of importing YouTube subscriptions. Export them using the instructions at www.snipca.com/53139, then click Data in FreeTube's Settings and choose Import Subscriptions (see screenshot above left).

9 Tor Browser

www.snipca.com/52284

Star of our Cover Feature in Issue 695 (pictured), Tor Browser is the only web browser to make your top 20 favourite programs of 2024. It was the first time we've devoted a whole feature to this often misunderstood privacy tool, so we're pleased that our interest in Tor was reciprocated by your clicks.

As we explained, Tor Browser provides a reliable alternative or accompaniment to a VPN, to help you stay anonymous online. Its powerful protection against trackers, hackers and snoopers lets you browse the web – and not just the dark web – without revealing your identity, location and activities. You can also access blocked content, stay safe on public Wi-Fi and much more.

You have a right to SEARCH without being followed.
Join the thousands of Tor supporters building an internet powered by privacy. Make a donation today.
Through December 31, your gift will be matched, up to $300,000!
Take Screenshot

Tor Browser lets you take and download screenshots of web pages

Tor Browser is completely legal to use, and you won't stumble across dubious onion sites unless you type their 56-character URLs. Many of you also downloaded its Android app (www.snipca.com/52285) to browse privately on your mobile device.

Top tip for 2025

Because Tor Browser is based on Firefox, it incorporates some of its features – as long as they don't compromise your privacy. For example, you can capture screenshots of web pages by right-clicking and choosing Take Screenshot (see screenshot above).

10 ValiDrive

www.snipca.com/49482

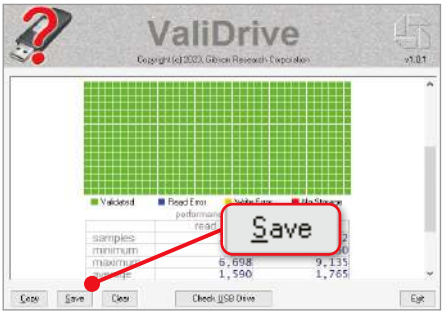
'Is your USB stick a fake?' we asked on the cover of Issue 679, and thousands of you got the answer by following our Workshop on ValiDrive. This free tool exposes USB sticks that don't offer anywhere near the amount of storage they claim. Sold on online marketplaces including Amazon, eBay and AliExpress, these deceptive devices can result in you losing valuable data rather than preserving it.

ValiDrive works by checking a USB stick's declared storage space, and verifying whether it can successfully store data in random sectors. Unlike similar tools, it won't overwrite any files and doesn't require you to reformat the drive. Validated sectors are shown as green blocks, while those with no storage are indicated in red.

The program can also detect read and write access errors, in case your memory stick has become corrupted – or already was when you bought it. These are shown as blue and yellow blocks.

Top tip for 2025

If ValiDrive detects your USB stick to have a fake capacity or access errors, save the evidence so you can claim a refund. Click the Save button (see screenshot below) to export ValiDrive's report as an RTF file and send it to the seller.



ValiDrive scans USB sticks for fake storage and lets you save the results

THE REST OF YOUR TOP 20 FAVOURITE SOFTWARE

11 PDFgear
www.snipca.com/52022

Down from fifth place in 2023, PDFgear focused on small updates rather than a major new version in 2024. Happily, it's still completely free, with many tools that are typically limited to paid-for software.

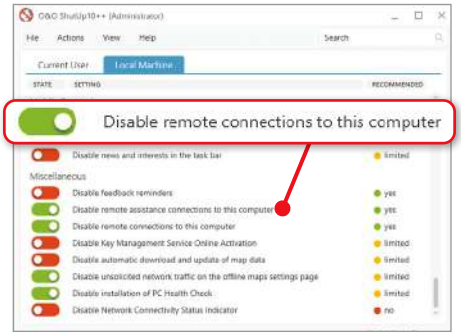
When we wrote about the free PDF editor in Issue 693's Best Free Software section, we highlighted its new option for creating your own PDFs from scratch. Click the New PDF button to open a blank page, then add text, images and other elements.

Other notable additions included a new Reader function in the Tools tab (see screenshot above right). This reads aloud the text from PDFs at the speed and volume of your choice.

PDFgear's new Reader tool reads aloud the text from PDFs

12 O&O ShutUp10++
www.snipca.com/51712

Microsoft made lots of annoying changes to Windows in 2024, but thankfully O&O ShutUp10++ was on hand to deal with them. This powerful free tool was updated several times during the year with new settings such as disabling remote access to your PC (see screenshot below), stopping it connecting automatically to your phone and blocking the controversial Copilot+ Recall feature.



O&O ShutUp10++ disables remote connections to your PC

O&O ShutUp10++ remains very easy to use, and now supports PCs with ARM processors. Curiously, its sister program O&O AppBuster (www.snipca.com/51374) failed to make your top 20, after reaching the top three in the previous three years.

13 Get_iplayer
www.snipca.com/49454

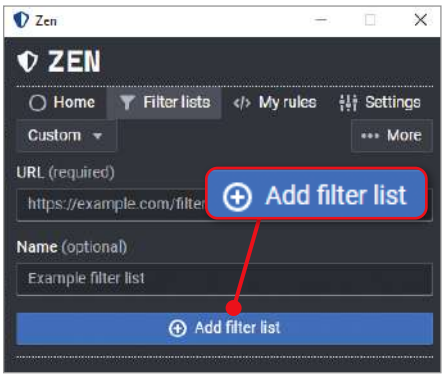
Last February, the BBC made the highly unpopular decision to shut down its iPlayer Downloads app, which let you save TV shows to your PC to watch offline. We swiftly responded with a Workshop in Issue 680 (page 38), which explained how to download BBC programmes using the free tool Get_iplayer.

Although it's not the easiest program to use (hence our step-by-step instructions), enough of you downloaded Get_iplayer to make it your 13th favourite software of 2024 (unluckily for the Beeb). See our Workshop on page 38 for another, simpler way to save iPlayer videos to your PC.

14 Zen Ad-Blocker & Privacy Guard
www.snipca.com/52775

Adverts popped up everywhere in 2024, so it's no wonder many of you tried this new tool. Zen blocks ads and trackers at system level, both in your browser and other software on your PC.

We first wrote about Zen in our 'Secret free software...' Cover Feature in Issue 683 (pictured right), where we explained how to boost its protection by enabling additional filters. It was recently updated to let you add custom filter lists (see screenshot below)



Add custom filters to Zen to block more ads and trackers

and create your own ad-blocking rules. Click 'More info' then 'Run anyway' if you see a SmartScreen warning.

15 uBlock Origin
www.snipca.com/50113

Speaking of ad blockers, uBlock Origin had a tough 2024. Google's strict new Manifest V3 (MV3) rules meant the extension was disabled in Chrome, for not following "best practices" – though you can still use it in other browsers.

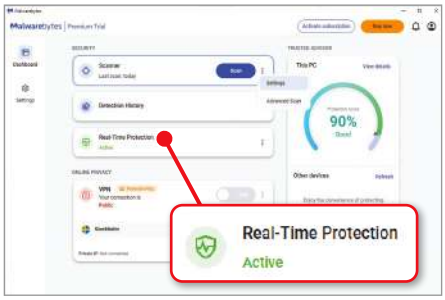
This may be why uBlock Origin slipped from third place to 15th in your list of favourite software, though it was still by far your most popular browser tool. As we recommended in our 'Stop Google breaking your browser extensions' feature in Issue 691 (page 60), you can install the new uBlock Origin Lite version (www.snipca.com/51604), which complies with MV3 rules, or switch to another browser such as Brave or Firefox, which will continue to support the original, more powerful add-on.

16 Snappy Driver Installer Origin
www.snipca.com/49901

Finding a driver updater that doesn't charge you to update drivers is surprisingly difficult, so it's no wonder lots of you like Snappy Driver Installer Origin (SDIO). Although it's down from 10th place in 2023, and second place in 2022, in both those years it appeared in Cover Features. In 2024, your clicks derived from our answer to one of your questions in our 'What should I download?' section (Issue 683, page 20).

To use SDIO, install its 20MB indexes pack, scan your PC for outdated drivers,

Snappy Driver Installer Origin updates device drivers for free



Malwarebytes limits most features to its paid-for subscription

Your Top 10 favourite software of 2023

1 FixWin
2 O&O AppBuster
3 uBlock Origin
4 DuckDuckGo Browser
5 PDFgear
6 Microsoft PC Manager
7 FreeTube
8 CrystalDiskInfo
9 Files
10 Snappy Driver Installer Origin

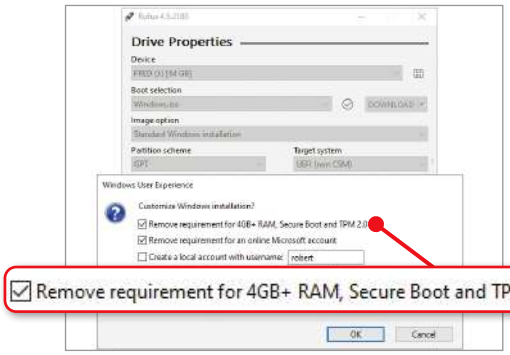
then decide which ones you want to update and click the Install button (see screenshot above).

17 Rufus

www.snipca.com/52441

In our Cover Feature in Issue 693 (pictured below), we explained your seven options concerning the end of support for Windows 10 in October 2025. The first of these was to upgrade to Windows 11 even if your PC doesn't meet Microsoft's system requirements - a trick made possible by Rufus.

This ingenious free tool allows you to create a bootable version of Windows (and other operating systems) on a USB stick, using an ISO file you download directly through Rufus. It was recently updated to beat Microsoft's latest upgrade restrictions (see screenshot below).



Rufus bypasses Microsoft's upgrade requirements for Windows 11

18 Malwarebytes

www.snipca.com/49517

When Malwarebytes 5 was released last February – the first major new version in five years – we made it the lead program in our Best Free Software section (Issue 679). Sadly, our excitement (and probably yours too) was tempered by the fact that most of the antivirus software's features still require a paid subscription, after a 14-day free trial.

Although you can scan for and remove malware for free, real-time protection – which automatically blocks viruses, ransomware and other threats – costs from £30 a year. Malwarebytes' VPN is only available in the Plus plan (£60 a year).

19 Upscayl

www.snipca.com/51108

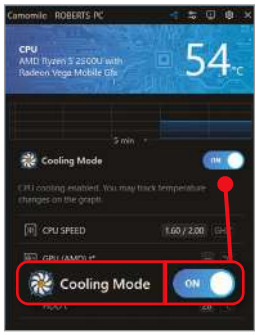
Of all the innovative new tools we recommended in Issue 688's 'Why you must use AI' Cover Feature (pictured below right), your favourite was undoubtedly Upscayl. This free software 'upscales' your images, increasing the size of photos while preserving their quality, and turning low-resolution pictures into high-res ones.

Upscayl offers a choice of AI models, so you can experiment to get the best results, and supports JPEG, PNG and WEBP images. The upscaling can be quite slow on lower-specification PCs, but a faster 'cloud' version of Upscayl is currently being tested.

20 Camomile

www.snipca.com/51587

Sneaking into your top 20 favourite programs of 2024 is this new free tool we tested in our 'Easy when you know how' section in Issue 691. Camomile checks the temperature of your PC's CPU, GPU and SSD, then cools everything down with a single click.



Camomile cools down your PC with a single click

To stop your system overheating, you simply switch on its Cooling Mode (see screenshot left) or use the keyboard shortcut Ctrl+Shift+Space.

In our initial test, Camomile reduced our processor's temperature from 74°C to 57°C. Since our article, it's been updated with a smarter design and new 'System information' option, and cooled our PC by an extra three degrees. ca

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8 NEW PC tasks you must learn in...

Enhance your computing this year by expanding your digital skills. **Robert Irvine** suggests the best tricks to master – and the free tools to use

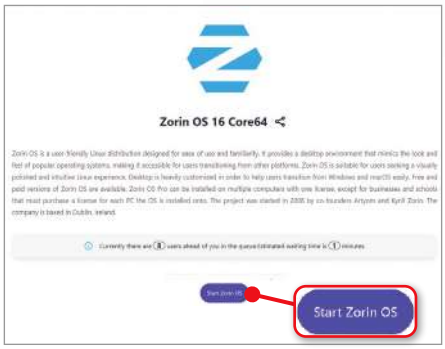
1 Create videos using AI

Most AI tools can now generate images from text prompts, and in 2025 they'll let you create original videos, too. OpenAI has just launched Sora for ChatGPT subscribers (www.snipca.com/53202), which can generate videos up to 20-seconds long, based on content you describe (see screenshot below).

A ChatGPT Plus plan lets you create 50 videos at 480p resolution or fewer videos at 720p each month, while a Pro subscription increases the quality to 1080p. You can also ask Sora to 'remix' and remove elements from existing videos.

Sora isn't currently available in the UK, but we expect it to be later in the year – including to free ChatGPT users. In the meantime, you can use other AI tools to generate videos. Popular freemium options include Canva's AI video generator (www.snipca.com/53204) and Invideo AI (www.snipca.com/53203).

OpenAi's new Sora tool creates videos from content you describe



DistroSea lets you test-drive dozens of Linux distros in your web browser

2 Master a Linux distro

Microsoft is ending support for Windows 10 in October, so now is a good time to try a Linux distro. Many are easier to master than Linux's reputation suggests, and it could spare you reluctantly upgrading to Windows 11.

To avoid the hassle of downloading multiple large ISO files, you can test-drive distros in your browser. The brilliant website DistroSea (www.snipca.com/53176) lets you try virtual versions of dozens of Linux distros for free without installing any software.

These include well-known names such as Debian, Ubuntu, Tails and the two distros that are most similar to Windows: Linux Mint and Zorin OS. Select a version then click the Start button (see screenshot above), and the distro will load in your browser.

You can then explore its interface, features and settings to help you decide whether to install the real thing. If you want to visit websites in your virtual distro, you'll have to sign into DistroSea using your Google account.

3 Divide your VPN traffic

A VPN is the best way to protect your privacy in 2025, because it encrypts your entire internet connection. However, you may not want every program on your PC to be routed through a VPN server – both for performance reasons and because it can cause problems when accessing some services, such as online banks.

To gain control over which data your VPN encrypts, you need to master 'split tunnelling'. This lets you specify which programs are always protected by your VPN, such as your main browser, and keep a 'whitelist' of software to exclude.

In NordVPN (www.nordvpn.com), for example, click the Settings cog, switch on 'Split tunneling' (see screenshot above) and choose to either 'Disable VPN for selected apps' or 'Enable VPN for selected apps only'. Click 'Add apps' and select the software to exclude or include.

Take control of your VPN connection by configuring 'split tunnelling'

4 Set up a media server

With the cost of streaming subscriptions rising again, there's never been a better time to cancel Netflix, Spotify and the rest and set up your own media server. This will let you stream TV programmes, films and music you've ripped, recorded or downloaded to devices around your home, without having to pay a monthly fee.

Plex (www.snipca.com/53177) is the most popular media-server software and is pretty easy to use, with a comprehensive support site (www.snipca.com/53178). You can install it on a NAS drive as well as your PC, and stream video and audio to the Plex or Plexamp app on your phone, tablet and smart TV.

Alternatively, try Jellyfin (www.snipca.com/53181), which is completely free – unlike Plex, which limits some features to its paid-for Pass. We explained how to use Jellyfin in our How To section in Issue 677 (page 35) – read it on our new Back Issue CD or USB stick (see page 50).

5 Learn to code a website

Learning to code not only gives you a better understanding of how websites and apps are put together, but can potentially earn you money. The charity FreeCodeCamp (www.freecodecamp.org) offers an extensive set of courses with recognised certifications, which are all completely free.

You can learn to code by completing coding challenges and building projects, giving you practical, hands-on experience. FreeCodeCamp provides over 11,500 tutorials, with no fixed schedule, so you can progress at your own pace.

Certifications include responsive web design, which explains how to code a personal website using HTML and CSS. Once you've mastered the basics, use ChatGPT's new Canvas mode (www.snipca.com/53201) to edit and refine code in your projects.

6 Create audiobooks from PDFs

Text-to-speech technology can now read content aloud in natural voices rather than stilted robotic ones. This allows you to convert documents into audio files, in effect creating your own audiobooks.

To quickly convert a PDF into an audiobook, upload it to Zamzar (www.zamzar.com), choose MP3 in the Convert To menu and select a voice, pitch and speed. Click 'Convert Now' (see screenshot above) and download the result.

Will Copilot steal an essential shortcut?

A growing number of PC tools are now competing for control of the Alt+Space keyboard shortcut. It's the default hotkey for launching the new ChatGPT app for Windows, the Run utility in PowerToys and Microsoft's updated Copilot app.

Alt+Space also displays your active program's window menu, which contains the Minimise, Maximise and Restore options. So how do you determine what will control the shortcut in 2025?

Microsoft addressed this concern when it announced the new Copilot app in December. It said: "For any apps installed on your PC that might utilise this keyboard shortcut, Windows will register whichever app is launched first on your PC and running in the background as the app that is invoked when using Alt+Space" (www.snipca.com/53205). In other words, it's first come, first served!

Use Zamzar to convert documents into audio files to listen to content read out loud

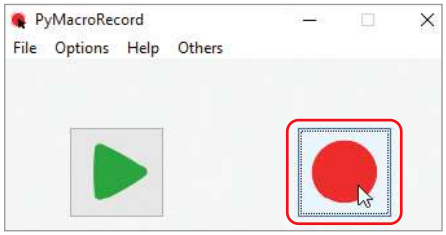
For a more human voice, visit Natural Reader (www.naturalreaders.com). Upload a PDF and choose from a huge selection of AI voices to hear it read in your browser. To download an MP3 audiobook, you'll need a Plus account, which costs $20.90 (£16.40) a month. Like most AI services, Natural Readers is freemium.

Another good option is PDF to MP3 (www.pdftomp3.com), which converts and downloads files for free, but limits you to a single voice (American, female).

7 Control your computer using macros

Speed up your PC activities and reduce the risk of RSI in 2025 by using macros to perform everyday mouse movements and keyboard commands. A new tool called PyMacroRecord (www.snipca.com/53199) is free and easy to use, and mitigates the risk of letting automated tasks run on your computer, which could otherwise prove dangerous.

Click its red Record button (see screenshot below left) to capture a sequence of mouse and keyboard actions – for example, launching your browser, typing a URL and pressing Enter. Click the button again to stop recording, then the green Play button to watch it perform the same actions. You can also set up hotkeys to control your recordings.



PyMacroRecord lets you record and run mouse and keyboard actions

If you're happy with the macro, click the File menu, choose Save and give it a name. To use the macro in future, press Ctrl+L to load your saved macros and select the one to run. When installing PyMacroRecord, click 'More info' then 'Run anyway' to skip the warning.

8 Generate your own QR codes

Scanning QR codes with your phone has become part of everyday life, but creating your own has advantages too. It allows you to quickly share web pages, Wi-Fi logins, contact details, map directions and much more without needing to copy, paste and email the information.

Create your own custom QR codes for other people to scan

There are lots of free online tools for creating QR codes, but our favourite is QRcode.co.uk (www.snipca.com/53198). This lets you choose the data you want to convert, customise the colour and design of your code, then download the result as a PNG, JPEG or WEBP image (see screenshot above) or print it. ca

Share your location privately

Arranging to meet someone? Need to let a loved-one know where you are? **Jonathan Parkyn** reveals the best ways to share your location with someone privately and safely

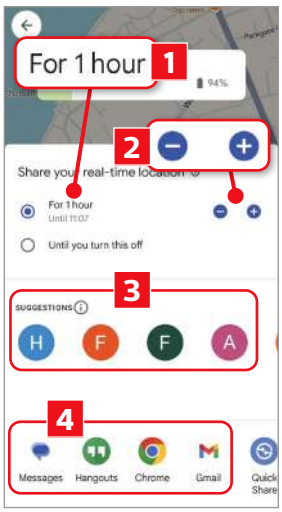
Use Google Maps on your phone

Arranging to meet friends and family somewhere can be a logistical nightmare. Sharing the location of your meeting place – or even your own real-time location – can help. It's easy to do, and you probably already have the necessary apps installed on your phone.

To share a location in Google Maps, such as a restaurant, for example, find the venue, tap it, then press the Share button in the pop-up tile on the lower portion of the screen (you may need to swipe left on the row of buttons beginning with Directions to reveal the Share button). Choose a method of sharing (such as Messages or WhatsApp), then select the people you want to share with and send them the location.

Alternatively, you can share your own location. This might be a better option if, say, your meeting place is particularly large, such as a park or shopping centre, or you need to be more specific about your precise meeting point. You can do this in Google Maps, too.

Open Maps, tap your profile icon in the top right, then tap 'Location sharing'. Tap the 'New share' button. In the pop-up tile, you can select how long you wish to share your location. The default is one hour (1 in our screenshot below) but you can use the – and + buttons 2 to decrease or increase this, or select 'Until you turn this off'. Remember to turn off location sharing manually if you select the latter option, or you'll broadcast your location indefinitely. Below this, you can choose from the suggested contacts 3, or tap an app icon (Messages, Gmail, WhatsApp and so on 4) and send the link in a message.

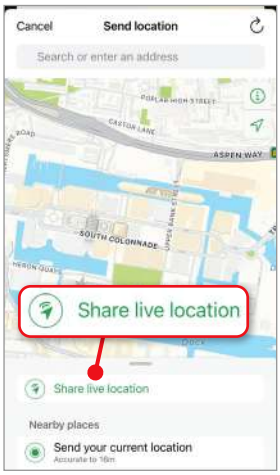


Choose how long you want to share your location and who with

Use WhatsApp on your phone

If you'd rather not use Google Maps (see our feature in Issue 684, page 62, for some reasons why), there are alternatives. If you use WhatsApp, for example, you can cut out the middleman by sharing your location from within the app. It's sent using end-to-end encryption, so no-one but the people you share it with will see it.

Before you start, make sure you've given WhatsApp permission to use your location data. To do this on an Android phone, open the Settings app and tap Apps, WhatsApp, Permissions, Location and select 'Allow only while using the app'. In iOS, open the Settings app and tap 'Privacy & Security', Location Services, WhatsApp and enable Always. In both cases, enable the 'Precise location' option for improved accuracy.

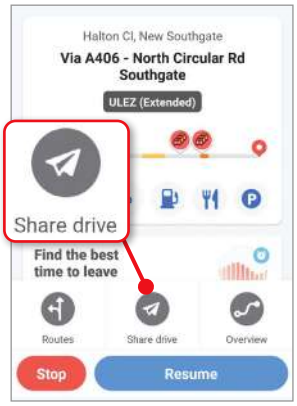


Tap 'Share live location' in WhatsApp then select the length of time

Now switch to WhatsApp and open a chat with a group or individual. In iOS, tap the + icon; in Android, tap the paperclip icon. In both cases, tap Location, then 'Share live location' (see screenshot above left). Select the length of time you want to share your location for, add a message if you like, then tap Send. You can stop sharing your live location at any time – open WhatsApp's settings, tap Privacy, 'Live location', then tap 'Stop sharing'.

Share your driving, cycling or walking progress

You can use Google Maps to let people know how far you are from your meeting place. Set the destination, then tap Start. Next, swipe up on the information tab at the bottom of the screen and tap 'Share trip progress'. Select a contact or tap an app you want to use to send your progress to someone.



Tap 'Share drive' in Waze to let people know when you're due to arrive

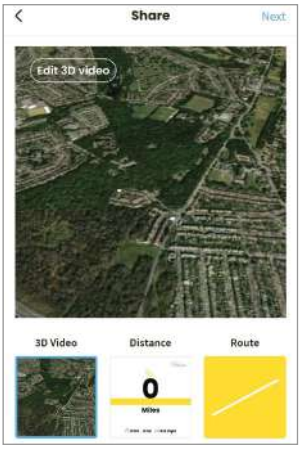
Lots of navigation apps let you share your estimated time of arrival (ETA). In Waze (which is free for Android www.snipca.com/53182 and iOS www.snipca.com/53183), for instance, start navigating as normal, then tap your estimated arrival time at the bottom of the screen, followed by 'Share drive' (see screenshot above right). Select the messaging or email app you want to use, then send your message.

In Apple Maps, tap the up arrow at the bottom of the screen during navigation, then tap Share ETA from the Route Options list. Tap 'Open Contacts' and choose the person you want to share your ETA with.

Share your exercise routes

Many fitness apps reserve the ability to share your exercise routes for paying customers, but not Relive (Android www.snipca.com/53184, iOS www.snipca.com/53185). It lets you track your outdoor activities, then share them with anyone you like.

Sign up for a free account, then tap the Record button at the bottom and allow the app to track your journey. Once you've finished, tap Stop, then Profile, and choose Activities to see your most recent routes. Tap the one you want, followed by the sharing method you want to use (email or WhatsApp, for example). You can choose to send your activity as a 3D video based on satellite maps (as shown in our screenshot below left) or as a simple top-down map route. You can also send a snapshot of the distance covered, speed and timings. Tap Next, then send your message.



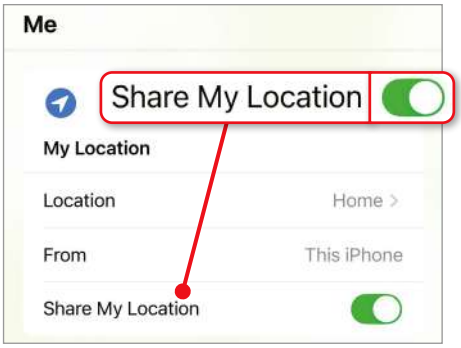
Relive lets you share your exercise route as a 3D video

Let someone know you're safe

Tracking another person's location has serious privacy implications (see box below). But if others are worried about you and you want them to know you're safe, consenting to share your location temporarily can be a useful precaution and give everyone peace of mind.

Perhaps you're going on a car journey in bad weather or coming home on your own late at night. Whatever the situation, you can use the location-sharing features in Google Maps or WhatsApp as described above. Alternatively, if you have an iPhone or iPad, you can use Apple's Find My app (get it free from www.snipca.com/53174 if it isn't installed) to share your location with other iOS users.

Open the app, tap the Me tab and switch on Share My Location. The device sharing your location will appear next to 'From:'. Next, tap the People tab and press the + icon. Select 'Share My Location' (see screenshot above), then choose your contacts and tap Send. You can choose how long you want to share your location: one hour, until the end of the day or indefinitely. You can also tap 'Stop Sharing My Location' at any time.



Switch on 'Share My Location' in the Me section of Apple's Find My app

If you've set up a Family Sharing group on your iPhone or iPad, you can share your location with multiple family members at once, and vice versa. Open the Settings app and tap Family, followed by Location Sharing, then choose which family members you want to share your location with.

Let someone know you're in trouble

Life360 (www.snipca.com/53186 for Android, www.snipca.com/53187 for iOS) is another mobile app that lets family members share their location with each other temporarily. Tap 'Settings', then Circle Management to add family members, manage location-sharing rules and so on. The free version of Life360 lets you set up an SOS button you can use to alert family members if you're somewhere you don't feel safe. Tap 'Set up SOS' on the Location tab to enable this.

Life360 also has a free crash-detection function that can automatically alert your emergency contacts if you're involved in a car accident. Tap Safety, then enable the Crash Alerts option. Tap Emergency Contacts at the bottom of the screen to tell the app who to alert.

Some phones also have built-in crash detection. If you own an iPhone 14 (or newer) running iOS 16 (or later), tap Settings, Emergency SOS, then enable 'Call After Serious Crash' – this will automatically call emergency services. Some Android devices offer a crash-detection feature, too. For example, owners of Google Pixel phones (4a and later) can open Settings, tap 'Safety and emergency', then Car Crash Detection to enable this and set it up. ca

Can you track someone for safety reasons?

As well as the location-sharing apps we've mentioned, it's possible to use tracking devices to monitor someone else's location remotely. Some, such as the AngelSense GPS Tracker (www.angelsense.com, from £25 per month) are designed to provide remote support for vulnerable people, and include features such as fall alerts. Others, such as Apple's AirTags (£35, www.apple.com/uk/airtag) and Samsung's Galaxy SmartTag2 (£24, www.snipca.com/53188) could offer a cheap and easy way to monitor the whereabouts of young children or elderly relatives.

However, even with the best intentions, using an app or tracking device to monitor someone else's location requires careful consideration of the ethical and legal implications.

In the UK, tracking any person without their permission may be deemed illegal under privacy laws, including the Data Protection Act 2018 and the UK GDPR. If the person being tracked is unable to give their consent, their legal guardian or representative must approve the tracking instead.

Problems Solved

Our experts solve all your tech problems

PROBLEM OF THE FORTNIGHT

Will I need a new Windows licence?

Q Flipping back through Issue 693's 'Windows 10 is doomed' Cover Feature, I found the information very useful. However, I now have a question that I fear I won't know the answer to until I put it to the test – and by then it'll be too late.

Let me explain. Because I don't have TPM security on my existing setup, my plan is to replace my motherboard and processor with more recent versions. However, when I attempt to boot to my new system I'm worried that my current Windows 10 installation will kick up an almighty fuss about this and tell me I can't transfer the licence to a 'new machine'.

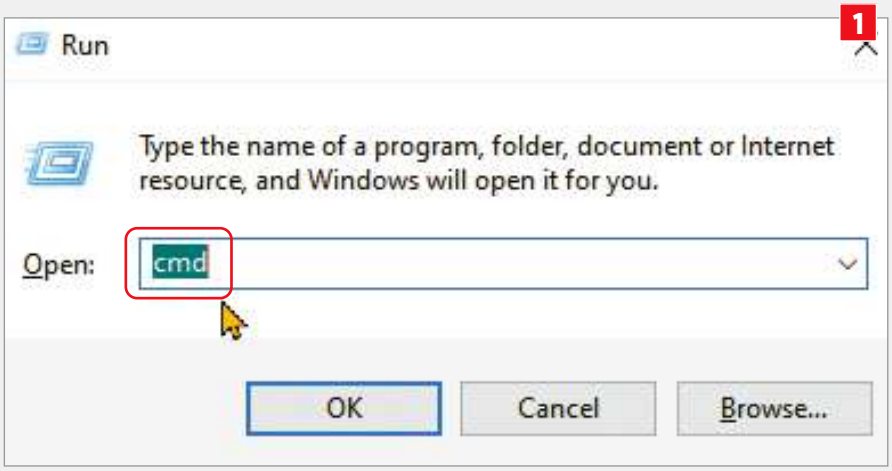
If this were to happen would I still have the option of upgrading to Windows 11 or would I be forced into a completely clean install, thus losing all my apps and data?

On a related note, could I upgrade from Windows 10 to Windows 11 Pro through the Reader Offer at www.snipca.com/50563 (see page 54). Or does that just upgrade from Windows 11 Home to Windows 11 Pro?

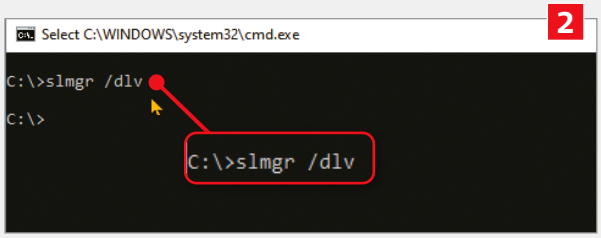
Derek Truby

A From the average PC user's perspective there are really just two Windows licence types to worry about – retail and original-equipment manufacturer (OEM). We'd say that most people these days end up with the latter, because it's OEM licences that cover Windows that's already installed on new PCs.

Windows OEM licences have numerous restrictions, and are essentially tied to the machine's original motherboard. So, if your PC has an OEM licence and you swap the motherboard, Windows will likely deactivate itself and Microsoft will not allow you to reactivate. You'd then need to buy a new retail Windows licence. With a retail licence, you could do what you want – as Windows will let you reactivate on a new motherboard.



To find out which kind of Windows licence you have, type cmd into the Run box...



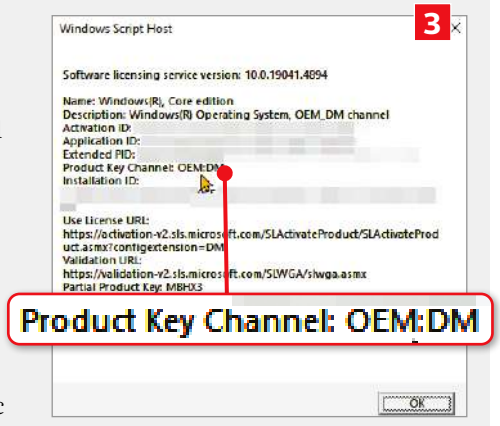
... then, in Command Prompt, type slmgr /dlv and press Enter

If you're not sure what kind of licence you have, there's a command-line trick that lets you find out. First, press Windows key+R to open the Run box, then type cmd (see screenshot 1) and press Enter. Next, in the Command Prompt window, type slmgr /dlv 2 and press Enter. Nothing will happen in Command Prompt, but a Windows box will open to show details about your licence. If you see 'OEM' next to the Product Key Channel line 3, then you have an OEM licence. Otherwise, it should be retail.

As for our Reader Offers, they change regularly – so it's important to check the specific details when buying. Regardless, it's important to understand that if you buy an Upgrade-suffixed version of Windows – from the *Computeractive* Store or anywhere else – you are paying to upgrade the licence you already have.

Your current PC has Windows 10 Home. The upgrade offer you're asking about upgrades Windows 11 Home to Pro. So, to take advantage of this specific offer, you'd first need to upgrade from Windows 10 Home to Windows 11 Home, which Microsoft lets you do free (and, indeed, actively encourages).

Then, you could use our deal to upgrade to Windows 11 Pro. Either way, if your existing installation is an OEM licence, you'll end up with Windows 11 Pro under an OEM licence – and that cannot be transferred to a new PC.



In the Windows box that opens, check next to the Product Key Channel line

Does my mousepad waste electricity when not charging?

Q A couple of years ago I bought a large mousepad with a built-in wireless charger from Amazon. This is useful, as I often have my phone next to me when I'm at my desk, so it keeps it topped up. However, I've often been curious about whether this thing continues drawing power when the phone's not on the charging spot? I know that in the grand scheme of things a phone charger isn't likely to use much energy but does my wireless pad still consume electricity even when it's not being used? It's plugged into a mains adapter, so I could switch it off at the wall – but I have to bend over to do that, and my back isn't what it was.

Charles Mayhew

This GIM mousepad with charging zone will pump out up to 15W of power

A We don't know exactly which mousepad you bought, but they're all basically variations on the same technology. For example, the pictured GIM mousemat (£30 from www.snipca.com/52902), which is compatible with the Qi charging standard, will typically be able to pump out up to 15W when a device is placed on its charging zone. Note that some deliver less than this, or your phone might not be able to handle the full power, but either way it won't be vastly different.

However, any such wireless-charging mat only consumes anything close to its maximum output when a phone is in position, and receiving charge. In standby mode, a Qi-compatible charger will consume only the tiniest fraction of its potential output – and very likely less than a single watt.

To keep the sums simple, let's assume that your particular mat's power consumption in standby mode is 1W. Left connected to the mains 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, it would consume 8,360W (or 8.76kWh). Ofgem's current price cap for electricity is 24.5p per kilowatt-hour (kWh). Obviously it'll consume more when you're charging. For context, at full 15W rate, that would work out to a fraction of a penny per hour – or about 8p per 24 hours.

But to answer your question directly: based on the wattage and current cost of electricity, your mousepad is likely costing you around two quid a year in standby mode. You may consider that a worthwile cost for avoiding the strain on your back.

How can I remove Skype from my PC?

Q Without any prompting on my part, Skype keeps installing on my desktop PC. I delete it, but it keeps coming back. Is there any way that I can stop this from happening?

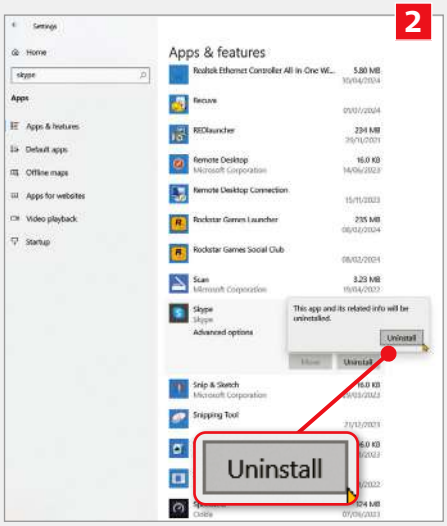
Iain McInroy

A Skype has forged a bit of a reputation for reappearing – it often pops up even when users think they've closed it. So, we're not entirely sure if you've actually uninstalled it or just think you've closed it? If it's actually uninstalled, it shouldn't reappear – with one caveat that we'll come to.

First, make sure you've properly closed it (which, with Skype, doesn't just mean signing out or clicking the cross on the program window). To do this, right-click the Skype icon in the notification area of the taskbar then choose Quit Skype (see screenshot 1).

Next, to uninstall it, first click the Start button followed by the Settings cog, then Apps. Now scroll down to find and click Skype, then click Uninstall before confirming by clicking Uninstall 2 again.

To close Skype properly, right-click its icon in the notification area, then select Quit



Uninstall Skype permanently via the Start button, Settings, then Apps

Note that if there is more than one Windows user with an admin account, and that other user logs in and reinstalls Skype, then it it'll reappear on your account also. We don't think that's the case here, but we're flagging the possibility – just in case it's someone else in your household that's causing you this bother.

Can I remove Copilot button from Microsoft Edge?

Q I use Microsoft Edge on the Linux distro Fedora 41 and I don't like the Copilot button cluttering up my browser. Can it be removed?

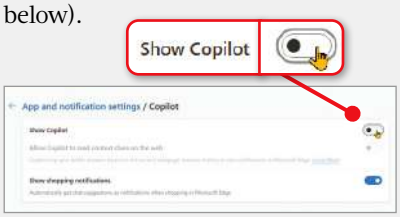
Ethan Armstrong

A It can but, as with so many minor annoyances like this, Microsoft has buried the option in the settings. Knowing Its desire to get everyone using Copilot, that was probably deliberate.

To find the relevant slider, first click to open the Edge menu (three dots, top right – 1 in our screenshot below) then choose Settings. Next, in the left-hand pane, click to select the 'Copilot and sidebar' option 2.

Click the three dots (top right), then Settings followed by 'Copilot and sidebar'...

You might think the option to disable Copilot would be right there. But, in fact, you have to drill down one more level by clicking Copilot under the 'App and notification settings' heading. Here, turn off the Show Copilot slider (see screenshot below).



...and click Copilot under 'App and notification settings' then turn off the Show Copilot

Why can't I save ODT docs in Word?

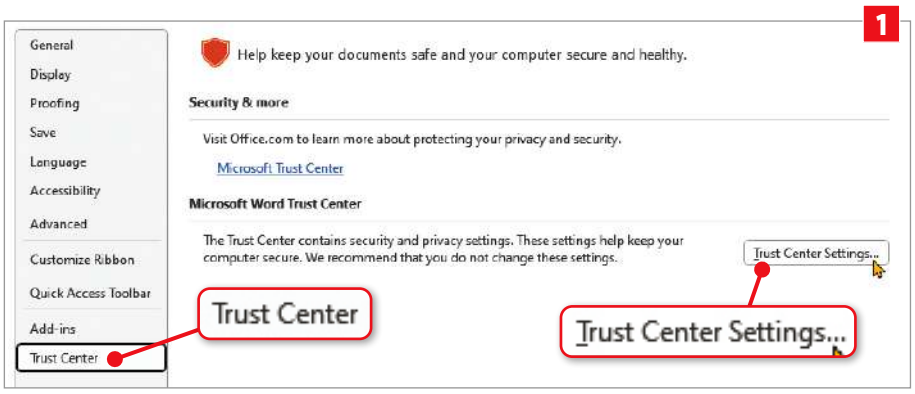
Q I have received a document from a friend in ODT format, which I'm told is LibreOffice. I can open this in my Microsoft Word program just fine, but I can't save my changes. When I try, I see an error message saying that the function has been blocked. Do you have any idea why this might be, and how to fix it?

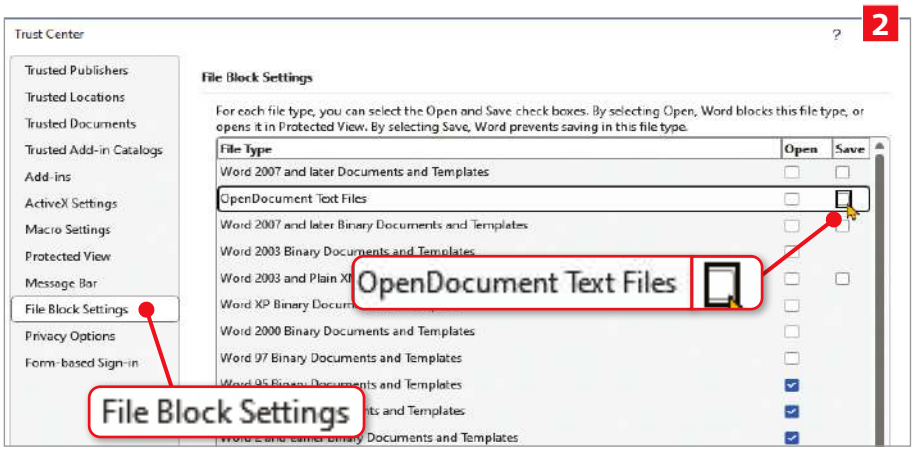
Steven North

A There is a feature in Word that will stop the opening or saving of certain file types – typically those that are older (or unsafe). That's almost certainly the cause here. However, the OpenDocument Format (ODT) itself is not old or unsafe, so we don't know why this setting would be enabled on your setup – but it could be that you or someone else inadvertently ticked a box while exploring settings.

Fortunately, it's pretty easy to fix. First, click the File menu followed by Options. Next, in the left-hand pane of the Word Options box, click Trust Center and then on the right click the Trust Center Settings button (see screenshot 1).

Next, on the left, click to select the File Block Settings tab. Then, on the right, look for the OpenDocument Text Files entry and, in the Save column, click to remove the tick from the adjacent tick box 2. Click OK and you should now be able to save changes to your ODT file.




2
Trust Center
Trusted Publishers
Trusted Locations
Trusted Documents
Trusted Add-in Catalogs
Add-ins
ActiveX Settings
Macro Settings
Protected View
Message Bar
File Block Settings
Privacy Options
Form-based Sign-in
File Block Settings
For each file type, you can select the Open and Save check boxes. By selecting Open, Word blocks this file type, or opens it in Protected View. By selecting Save, Word prevents saving in this file type.
File Type
Open
Save
Word 2007 and later Documents and Templates
OpenDocument Text Files
Word 2007 and later Binary Documents and Templates
Word 2003 Binary Documents and Templates
Word 2003 and Plain XML
Word XP Binary Documents
Word 2000 Binary Documents and Templates
Word 97 Binary Documents and Templates
OpenDocument Text Files
File Block Settings

Work through these settings in Word to be able to save changes to ODT documents

Q: Is my ISP throttling my broadband?

A: Issue 666, page 67 – find it on our 2023 Back Issue CD

Buy it from www.snipca.com/48860

What's causing my drives to drop their connection?

Q My PC, built in 2023, has a mix of 12 traditional hard drives and SSDs. Sometimes, at random, about half of these drop their connection, after two very short beeps. Restarting the PC brings them back. The only thing I can think of is that my SATA AHCI controller is at fault, because the driver for this controller is dated 2006. Any idea what the problem might be?

John Francis

Microsoft 'backdates' its drivers so that they are subordinate to manufacturer drivers

This Cooler Master PSU can handle up to 1250W of power

A Actually, the driver date is misleading and a red herring. Remarkably, Microsoft intentionally 'backdates' many Windows drivers, to ensure that its operating system treats them as subordinate to any manufacturer drivers that are present. You can read more about the company's approach on its blog post at www.snipca.com/52905 (see screenshot above right) but the bottom line is that your system's default SATA drivers are almost certainly fully up to date.

There could be numerous hardware-related matters causing this quirk, so first we'd suggest venturing inside your PC to check all the connections. However, a dozen drives is a lot of drives. So we wonder if the machine's power-supply unit (PSU) might not be up to the job of running everything at once.

It sounds like your PC was custom-built, so we'd jot down all the key components – including your drives – and add up how much power they might draw at peak (in Watts). If this figure is close to or more than your PSU's maximum rating, that could explain why some drives are randomly dropping out. You'll need either to disconnect some components or fit a more powerful PSU. The pictured Cooler Master model (above), for example, goes all the way up to 1250W (£125 from www.snipca.com/52903).

Can I use an HDMI splitter with my soundbar?

Q I recently bought a Hisense soundbar to use with my Sony TV and Virgin TV 360 tuner. I want to use the HDMI ARC socket from the 360, connected through an HDMI splitter, to feed both the TV and the soundbar. Will this setup allow me to control all the devices using the 360 remote control?

Ray Hoiles

Connect a cable from your TV to your soundbar's HDMI ARC or optical audio socket

A While it's technically possible to split an HDMI-output signal to supply multiple devices, this would be an impractical way of going about it.

We don't know your specific TV or soundbar models but, for your setup, the simplest (and best) option would be to plug an HDMI cable from the Virgin TV 360 box to an HMDI input on your TV; and then another HDMI cable from the TV's HDMI ARC socket to the soundbar's HDMI ARC socket (pictured 1). With this setup, you can use the Consumer Electronics Control (CEC) feature of HDMI to control various aspects of your setup using the 360 remote control.

If your TV is getting on a bit then it might not have an HDMI ARC socket. In that case, it might instead have an optical audio connector, sometimes known as a Toslink socket.

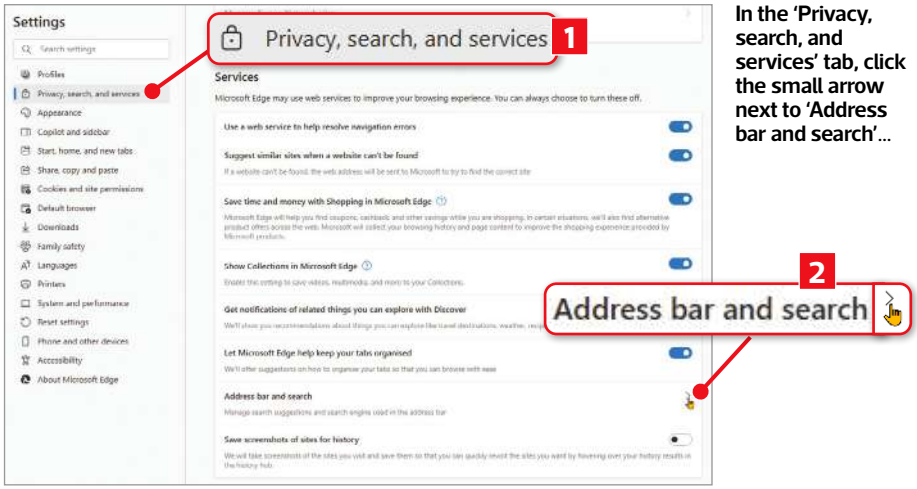
If your soundbar also supports optical audio 2, then you can use this instead of HDMI ARC to have your TV output the 360's audio to the soundbar – but you won't be able to use HDMI CEC to control it.

Many Hisense soundbars, such as the pictured HS214 model, support both HDMI ARC and Toslink.

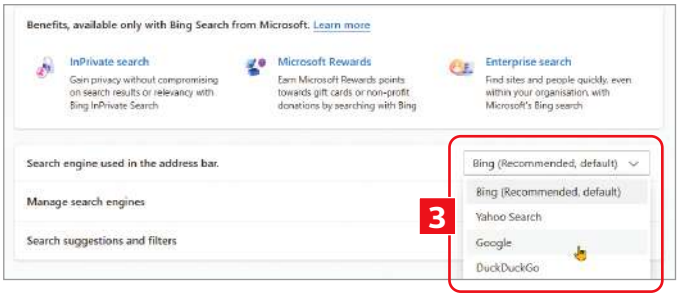
How do I stop Bing popping up when I'm browsing?

Q With the Bing browser, I find that if I type a web address incorrectly it jumps into the Bing home page, which is incredibly annoying. It hasn't happened recently – possibly because I take more care inputting web addresses. Regardless, how can I stop this annoyance from occurring in the future?

Ken Wilson



In the 'Privacy, search, and services' tab, click the small arrow next to 'Address bar and search'...



...then in the 'Search engine used in the address bar' dropdown menu, choose your preferred search engine

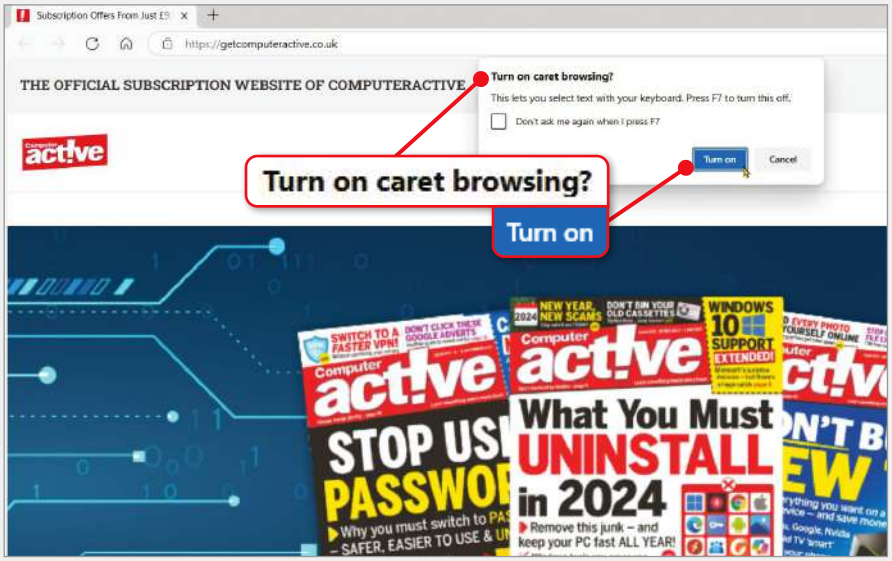
A To be clear, Bing isn't itself a web browser: it's the name of Microsoft's search engine, which can be accessed using any browser. Now, as it happens, Bing is the default search engine for Edge, which is the name of Microsoft's web browser – so we're pretty sure that's your browser, and have just got the terminology a bit mixed up.

So, Edge is the web browser that you're using and what's bothering you is that it defaults to using the Bing search engine. That's relatively easy to fix, if you know where to go. First, in Edge, click the menu button (three dots, top right), then choose Settings. Next, in the left-hand pane, click to choose the 'Privacy, search, and services' tab (1 in our screenshot above right). Then, in the right-hand pane, scroll down to find the Services section and, below that, click the small arrow next to 'Address bar and search' 2. Finally, in the dropdown menu next to 'Search engine used in the address bar', choose your preferred search engine 3.

What is caret browsing?

Q Recently, when using Edge, I accidentally pressed something on my keyboard and was met with a box asking if I wanted to turn on caret browsing (see screenshot). I have no idea what that is, so I quickly clicked Cancel. However, afterwards I was curious as to what I'd done to make this message appear and what caret browsing is? Could you explain?

Sally Evans


Subscription Offers From Just £9
https://getcomputeractive.co.uk
THE OFFICIAL SUBSCRIPTION WEBSITE OF COMPUTERACTIVE
Turn on caret browsing?
This lets you select text with your keyboard. Press F7 to turn this off.
Don't ask me again when I press F7
Turn on
Cancel
Turn on caret browsing?
Turn on
What You Must UNINSTALL in 2024
Remove this junk – and keep your PC fast ALL YEAR!

Caret browsing lets you navigate websites using your keyboard and a text cursor

A Certainly. It sounds like you accidentally hit the F7 key, as this enables caret browsing. Caret is another word for a text cursor, and this feature lets you navigate websites using the keyboard and a text cursor. It is designed as an accessibility feature, for those who struggle using a mouse.

When in this mode, you can move around and select items using a text cursor much as you might in a word processor. For example, you can hold down Shift and then press the right or left cursor (arrow) keys to select text. You can also visit selected links by pressing Enter. To disable it, simply tap F7 again.

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN...

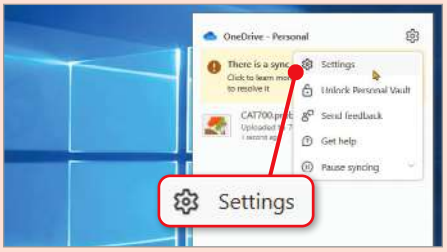
Cloud and local storage?

Q I herald from the days of the Amstrad word processor (where I used to store all my files on little plastic cartridges). Later, I upgraded to a PC and got used to saving my documents on to its hard drive. Now, on my Windows 11 machine, the computer seems to want to store everything in OneDrive.

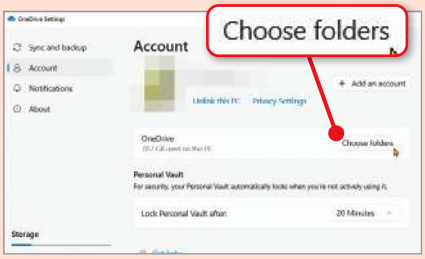
I understand this is a 'cloud' service, but even though you write about these things I don't really understand the difference between OneDrive and my hard drive. If I save a file to OneDrive is it only online? Or is it on my hard drive somewhere? Or what?

Martin Bishop

A This stuff can certainly be confusing, not helped by the likes of Microsoft pushing people into using services like OneDrive. You asked about OneDrive, so we'll focus on that. However, it's worth knowing that, while every cloud service looks and feels a little different, the best-known ones all work in much the same way.



Check your OneDrive settings in the notification area of the taskbar...



...then click 'Choose folders' to pick which folders are synced to OneDrive

So, when you save a file to your computer it is in the first instance always saved to your hard drive – a physical storage device inside your computer. Then, depending on how OneDrive is set up, an exact copy of that same file is uploaded to OneDrive. There, it will be stored, securely, somewhere in Microsoft's vast global network of server computers.

This is the default setup, incidentally, so unless you've changed it, that's how it will be on your system. You can check what files are in your OneDrive at any time, by logging in at www.onedrive.com, using your usual Microsoft username and password.

However, again by default, those same files will always be on your PC's hard drive, meaning you can access them whether or not the computer is online. When it next connects to the internet, OneDrive will sync any changes to your OneDrive. This happens in the background – so there's nothing for you to do. You can check the settings by right-clicking the OneDrive icon on the notification area, at the far right of the taskbar, and then choosing Settings (see screenshot 1). Click 'Choose folders' 2 to pick which folders are synced to OneDrive.

Want to know the difference between technical terms? Email noproblem@computeractive.co.uk

Does Amazon know my Wi-Fi network password?

Q I bought a second Amazon Echo Dot smart speaker for my kitchen. Setting it up was easy, because it was evidently able to retrieve the password for my Wi-Fi network from somewhere. On the one hand, I was grateful for this convenience. But on the other, it made me wonder how this happened? Does Amazon know my password? And if so, is that safe?

Greg Coleman

A Yes, Amazon probably has your Wi-Fi password saved on its servers. The Alexa app will have asked you if you agree to this when you set up your first Echo Dot. This is part of what Amazon calls 'Frustration-Free Setup'.

You can read more about Frustration-Free Setup at www.snipca.com/52904. The distilled version is that your Wi-Fi password is stored (encrypted) on Amazon servers. When it's later needed, such as when you set up your new Echo Dot, it is retrieved automatically – saving you the hassle of having to manually enter it.

Saved Network Passwords
Your saved network passwords allow you to configure compatible devices so that you will not n
connect or reconnect your compatible devices to your network and will not share them with any
Your Saved Wi-Fi Passwords
All Devices
Delete
Delete
Your saved thread passwords
All Devices

Delete your Wi-Fi password from Amazon's servers via the 'Manage Your Content and Devices' page

Is this safe? No less or more so than relying on any other cloud service to store private data. In other words, it's safe until the day that Amazon suffers a critical data breach. Is that likely? No, but it's not inconceivable.

If you're not happy with this, you can delete your Wi-Fi password from Amazon's servers, via the 'Manage Your Content and Devices' page at www.amazon.co.uk/mycd. Click to select the Preferences tab, at the top, then scroll down to the Saved Network Passwords section. There, under Your Saved Wi-Fi Passwords and to the right of All Devices, click the Delete button (see screenshot).

Next Issue

ON SALE Weds 15 Jan

- Is cloud storage reliable in the long term?
- Would my mobile payments be secure?
- Why won't my Windows update? ...And many more

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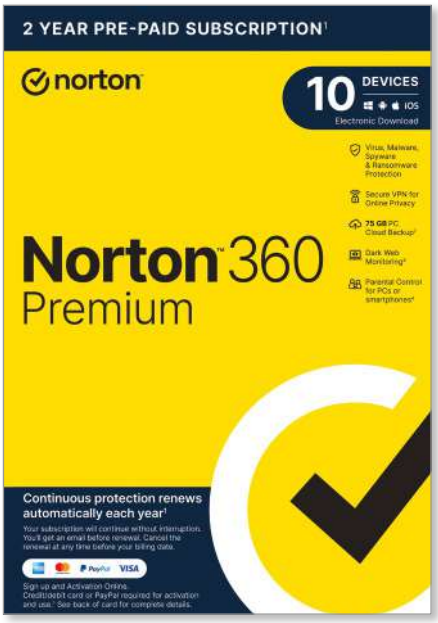


Norton is made by NortonLifeLock Inc – a standalone company dedicated to consumer cyber safety. It has always performed strongly in *Computeractive* antivirus tests, so we highly recommend it.

10 devices for two years NOW ONLY £19.99*

Normally £179.99

Buy it from our Software Store at www.snipca.com/33247

*while stocks last

Reader Support

Having a problem with our recommended software or expert tips? Email **editor@computeractive.co.uk** and we'll do our best to help

Why can't I download Tor browser?

Q I've tried downloading the Tor browser as you recommended in Issue 695's Cover Feature 'Why you must use Tor'. However, I always get the same error message: 'Secure Connection Failed. An error occurred...'. The message advises that I 'contact the website owners to inform them of the problem', but as Firefox or Norton won't let me contact Tor, this will be difficult. Any suggestions?

Paul Hornsby

A We're not entirely sure whether you can't access the Tor website through Firefox, or any websites through Firefox when Tor is running. We'll tackle both problems. Firefox shows this error when it can't establish a secure connection with a web page. However, Firefox isn't blocking you from downloading Tor. We tested this by using Firefox to visit the URL we gave for Tor in Issue 695 (www.snipca.com/52284).

It's more likely that Norton is to blame. It doesn't officially block Tor, but other users have reported similar problems. Norton might be falsely identifying Tor as malware, but we think the problem is that its Smart Firewall is blocking traffic when you try to browse sites – and this may be stopping you downloading it.

To fix this, configure the firewall to give Tor internet access. The instructions will vary depending on your version of Norton, but try clicking Settings in the main Norton program window, then Firewall. On the Program Control tab, locate Tor in the list of programs, then select Allow from the Access menu next to it and click Apply. For more details, visit www.snipca.com/52953.

Does Lexar JumpDrive come with fingerprint software?

Q I found Issue 676's Cover Feature on external hard drives very useful, and I'm thinking of buying the Lexar JumpDrive F35 Pro (£36 from www.snipca.com/52503, pictured). Can you confirm that it comes with fingerprint-authentication software and works with Windows 11? Lexar's website doesn't make this clear.

Lexar's JumpDrive F35 Pro comes with fingerprint-authentication software

Nick Browning

A Yes, the software you need to use the Lexar JumpDrive F35 Pro's fingerprint protection comes with the drive. As the product's user manual explains: "When using the F35 for the first time, please run the built-in application on your F35 with your computer. This application is designed to set passwords and enrol fingerprints, manage users whose accounts are registered, and change the size of the public and secure partition." You'll find manuals for Lexar's products at www.snipca.com/52986, although you need to enter your email address to receive them.

When you first plug in the drive, open it in a File Explorer window and run the 'FingerTool_Lexar(Windows).exe' file. Click the Register button (see screenshot above) and follow the steps to set up your administrator password and register your fingerprint.

The tool works perfectly with Windows 11, but only for accessing files on the JumpDrive F35 Pro drive. You can't use the fingerprint reader to log into Windows, for example.

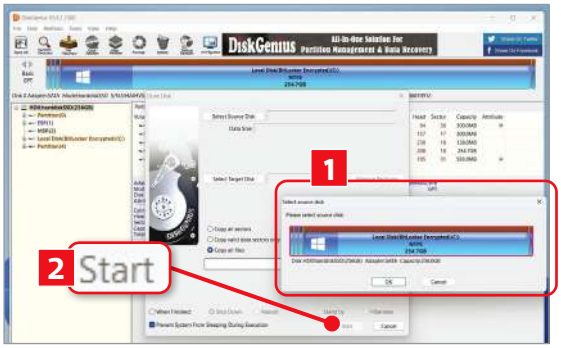
Where should I save cloning software?

Q I was interested in cloning my hard drive using DiskGenius (www.diskgenius.com), as reader David Clowes recommended in Issue 693 (page 41). But I stopped the download because I saw a warning in red explaining where I should download it – presumably not on the hard drive, or I might destroy my data. Should I download it to a USB stick, then use the software from there?

Oliver Rogers

A The red warning message you're seeing is only relevant if you intend to use DiskGenius's data-recovery features. Assuming you simply want to clone your drive, you can safely ignore the message and install DiskGenius on your computer's hard drive as normal.

To clone your PC's system drive, first plug in an external drive that has enough free space, then launch DiskGenius, click the Tools menu and select Clone Disk. Select your system (C:) drive (1 in our screenshot below) as the source disk when prompted, then follow the steps, selecting your external drive as the target disk. When you're ready, click Start 2.



Click Tools, Clone Disk, then select your C: drive as the source disk and follow the prompts

Jargon Buster

480p/720p/1080p/1440p Common types of high-definition video of 640x480, 1280x720, 1920x1080 and 2560x1440 pixels respectively.

32bit/64bit A measure of how much data a PC can process at once. Most older computers are 32bit, more modern ones are 64bit.

4K Video with a resolution of at least 3840x2160 pixels.

Admin mode Allows you to make changes to a computer that will affect other people who use it.

AHCI Advanced Host Controller Interface. A standard that allows SATA drives to support advanced features.

ARC Audio return channel. A feature on TVs that lets audio signals travel both to and from the TV via a single HDMI cable.

ARM Advanced RISC Machine. Processors that are more energy-efficient and used in more devices than those made by AMD and Intel.

Benchmarking Comparing software and products with an accepted standard.

Blue screen of death Shown when your PC crashes.

cd/m² Candela per square metre. Standard unit of brightness.

Chatbot A program designed to recreate conversation with human users, especially over the internet.

Clean install An operating system installation that overwrites all other content on the hard drive.

Code Programming languages used to create software.

Command line A way to control a computer by typing instructions one at a time. See Command Prompt.

Command Prompt A black window into which you can type instructions.

Core Units on a processor that carry out program instructions.

CPU Central Processing Unit. Another term for a PC processor.

Cryptocurrency A digital currency not backed by any country. The most popular is Bitcoin.

CSS Cascading Style Sheets. An HTML feature that lets web designers choose how some elements on a website look.

CSV Comma Separated Value. A standard file format, used for storing data in tables, that most spreadsheet programs can open.

Dark mode Showing white text on a black background.

Dark web Websites that can only be accessed using special software such as the Tor browser.

DCI-P3 A colour space that has a wider spectrum than sRGB.

Distro A version of the Linux OS and the programs that go with it.

Driver A file that tells Windows how to work with an external device.

DSLR Digital single-lens reflex. A digital camera that uses a moving mirror so its viewfinder looks out through the lens.

Duplex printing Printing on both sides of a sheet of paper.

End-to-end encryption A way of encrypting messages so the only people who can read them are the sender and recipient.

eSIM A virtual SIM card that's built into a phone, making it easier to change network.

EXE A program file designed to run in Windows. Has the file extension .exe.

Firewall Software or hardware that prevents unauthorised access to a computer over a network.

FLAC Free Lossless Audio Codec. A type of digital audio file that can be created from CD with no loss of audio quality.

Fps Frames per second. Used to indicate gaming performance.

Frame rate The number of still images, or frames, shown per second to create a moving image.

Freemium A business model where basic services are provided for free, while more advanced features must be paid for.

GDPR General Data Protection Regulation. 2018 EU law strengthening people's privacy.

GEDCOM Short for Genealogical Data Communication. A file format used by genealogy programs to share data.

Graphics card A component in a computer that produces the image shown on the monitor.

Hardware acceleration Using a graphics card to radically improve video and games performance.

Hash-matching Comparing two unique codes (hashes) created from data to check if the data is the same or has been changed. It helps ensure data hasn't been altered or corrupted.

HDMI High-definition media interface. A type of connection that transmits high-definition video and audio signals.

HEIC High-efficiency image container. Apple's new default image format for iOS.

HEIF High Efficiency Image Format. An image format that uses advanced compression to store high-quality images in smaller file sizes, commonly used by modern devices like smartphones for photos.

HTML Hypertext Markup Language. The language used to write most web pages.

Hyper-threading A technology used by some Intel processors that allows them to multitask.

IP address Internet Protocol address. A unique set of numbers used to identify computers and websites on the internet.

IPS A screen technology. Monitors that use it have wider viewing angles and better, more accurate colours than monitors that do not use this technology.

ISO file A type of image file that contains data from a CD or DVD.

JPEG Joint Photograph Experts Group. A type of image file created by most digital cameras. Some data is lost with each save.

Layers Image-editing programs let users create multiple layers. Think of them like layers of glass stacked on top of the canvas, which can be drawn on, re-ordered or hidden.

LED Light-emitting diode. An electronic device that emits light.

M.2 A standard specification for internal PC expansion cards and connectors.

Manifest V3 Third version of the software that runs Chrome browser extensions.

Micro HDMI An HDMI connector measuring 6.4x2.8mm.

MicroSD card A small type of memory card. Can be converted to SD size using an adapter.

MVNO Mobile virtual network operator. A mobile provider that piggybacks on another network rather than its own.

NAS Network-attached storage. A hard drive attached to a network that can be shared with other PCs.

OCR Optical character recognition. The process by which printed text is scanned and converted into documents that can be edited.

OLED Organic light-emitting diode. A thin-film organic light-emitting diode used in computer displays and television screens.

Onion address URLs for websites on the dark web, accessible only through the Tor browser.

Picture-in-picture Shows video in a small moveable screen while you browse the web or watch TV.

PNG Portable Network Graphics. A format for images that shrinks file sizes using compression without discarding any data.

PowerShell A Windows tool for automating commands.

Qi Pronounced 'chee', it's the main standard for wireless charging.

QR code Quick Response code. A barcode that can be read using smartphones.

RAM Random-access memory. The PC's working area, used for data storage while it's switched on.

Ransomware Malware where hackers lock files on your PC and demand money to release them.

RAW A digital photo format that stores the image exactly as the camera captured it

Read Access data saved on a PC.

Refresh rate Measured in Hertz (Hz), the number of times a second the image on your screen is redrawn.

Refurbished A second-hand device repaired by its manufacturer so it can be resold.

Roaming charge Fee incurred for using your phone to receive data while overseas.

RTF Rich Text Format. A file format used to transfer files between different types of word-processing programs.

SATA Serial ATA. An interface for connecting hard drives and optical discs to a computer.

Script A short program that is stored on a web server to control part of a website.

Social tariff Discounted broadband package available to customers on benefits.

sRGB A standard RGB colour space for use on monitors, printers and the internet.

Splitter A device that lets you stream video from a single source to multiple screens.

SSD Solid-state drive. Storage that uses no moving parts.

SVG Scalable vector graphics. See Vector graphics.

Temporary file Created by sites and software to store information for a specific purpose.

Tor browser A web browser designed for anonymous surfing.

TPM Trusted Platform Module. A computer chip that stores keys that encrypt data on your hard drive.

Travel The distance the keys of a keyboard have to be pressed before the keystroke is recognised.

Two-factor authentication A system that uses two different means to identify the user.

.txt A basic file format that contains nothing but text.

USB-C A new connector that's reversible, letting you plug it in upside down.

Vector graphics Graphics that are rendered as smooth lines and can be enlarged to any scale without a loss of quality.

VESA Video Electronics Standards Association. A standard mount for attaching monitors to stands, walls and PCs.

VPN Virtual private network. An online service that keeps all your internet communication safe and private.

WAV file An audio file, used for recording music and other sounds to disk.

WEBP Google's image format designed to create files that are smaller for the same quality.

Widget A small program that runs on the Windows desktop.

Write Save data to a hard drive.

.xlsx The default file format for Microsoft Excel since version 2007.

ZIP file A file that contains compressed documents or files.

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Broadband GENIE

Broadband Genie's helpline is powered by Comparison Tech (part of UK Web Media).

Easy when you

Know How

Keen to remove embarrassing old posts from social media, **Robert Irvine** tries to...

Deep-clean his Facebook account

Aside from the occasional 'like', birthday wish and someone tagging me in a photo before I could stop them, it's been more than five years since I last posted anything on Facebook. My profile picture dates back to 2017 and several of my 'friends' are either estranged or sadly deceased.

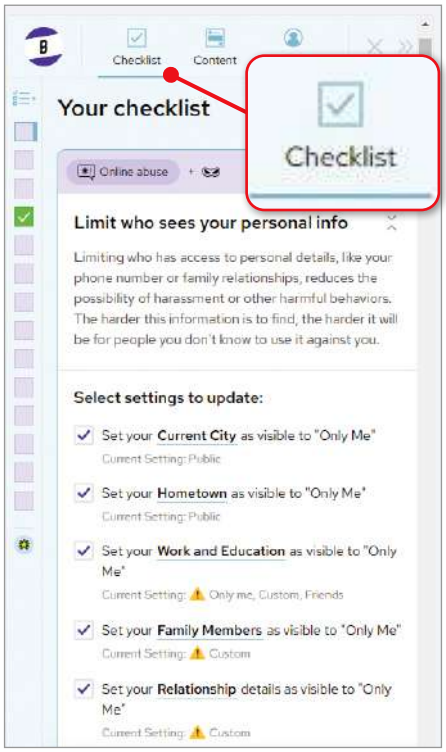
> My nonsensical posts on Facebook stretched back years

I'm not telling you this because I'm too cool for Facebook, and now hang out on TikTok, Discord or Bod, or whatever the 'in' thing is these days, but because I can't bring myself to delete or deactivate my account. A bit like *EastEnders*, Facebook is something I'm no longer interested in, but occasionally have a peek at to see what people are up to.

When I do, I'm sometimes surprised by a 'memory' of something I posted many moons ago, such as a lame joke or a photo of me in a silly hat. Although I've locked down my Facebook privacy settings, I still worry about who else can see this nonsense.

So I was interested to read about a tool called Block Party (www.snipca.com/53217), which promises to 'deep-clean' your social-media accounts of embarrassing content and recommend ways to secure your personal information.

Block Party costs $20 (£15.70) a year, but it also has a free plan and lets you try paid-for features for seven days, without entering your payment-card details. I installed its extension from the Chrome Web Store (www.snipca.com/53207), clicked the option to start a free trial and


Checklist
Content
Your checklist
Checklist
Online abuse
Limit who sees your personal info
Limiting who has access to personal details, like your phone number or family relationships, reduces the possibility of harassment or other harmful behaviors. The harder this information is to find, the harder it will be for people you don't know to use it against you.
Select settings to update:
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Current Setting: Public
Set your Hometown as visible to "Only Me"
Current Setting: Public
Set your Work and Education as visible to "Only Me"
Current Setting: Only me, Custom, Friends
Set your Family Members as visible to "Only Me"
Current Setting: Custom
Set your Relationship details as visible to "Only Me"
Current Setting: Custom

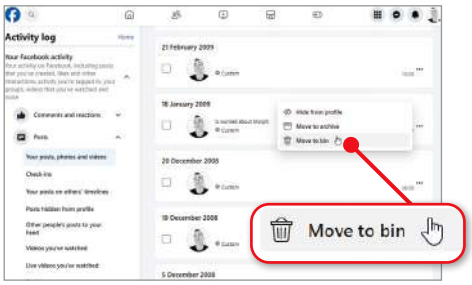
Block Party's privacy check is more useful than its restrictive deep clean

tried to sign up for an account. But I was told that Block Party was "only available in the USA", and that I needed to join a waiting list for its UK release.

Ignoring this setback, I chose to check Facebook through the free plan, and clicked the button to 'Start your first full scan'. Block Party scanned my profile and account settings, and presented me with its findings.

On the Checklist tab (see screenshot above), it highlighted privacy settings that needed tightening, such as making certain personal info visible to 'Only me'; blocking friend requests and messages from strangers; and enabling two-factor authentication. All good advice, though essentially common sense.

I was more interested in the Content tab, where you can review all Facebook photos you've been tagged in and remove unwanted tags. Except I couldn't, because Block Party had blocked me from signing up for its trial. The 'Experience' tab,



Robert manually removed embarrassing old Facebook posts and comments

which lets you 'unfriend' people you don't like any more, was similarly locked behind an Upgrade button.

Still determined to clean up my Facebook account, I decided to do it myself. I went to my Settings page at www.facebook.com/settings, clicked 'Activity log' under 'Your activity' and chose 'Your Facebook activity' in the left-hand column.

I clicked Posts and was horrified to see details of everything I'd ever posted on Facebook – much more than I remembered – and every video I'd watched. Information about the latter was only visible to me, but my nonsensical public posts stretched back years.

Although I was tempted to tick the All box and purge the lot, I instead selected the most cringeworthy examples and chose 'Move to bin' (see screenshot above). Facebook also lets you 'archive' posts, in case you ever want to restore them, and use its filters to show only content from specific years.

Next, I clicked 'Comments and reactions', chose Comments and deleted the quips I'd made on other people's Facebook posts – Oscar Wilde, I am clearly not. I then selected 'Photos and videos you've been tagged in' and removed incriminating tags.

The whole clean-up process took about half an hour, but at least it was free with no restrictions. I doubt my Facebook friends will even notice any difference, but I'll certainly sleep more easily.

Need help cleaning up your social media? Let us know: noproblem@computeractive.co.uk

Next issue: Robert tries to crack this own passwords

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